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An invitation to Harry Collins' humanistic sociology

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Harry Collins has developed a humanistic sociology of science, technology, and expertise. This is based on the insight that humans are distinctive by virtue of having *socialness*. Socialness is made possible by language. But language is only meaningful in a social form of life. Only human beings are capable of being collective representations. Therefore only human beings are capable of being and doing knowledge. Collins shows that expertise is real and only exists in forms of life. So, for society to have scientific knowledge, it has to protect and respect the integrity of the human forms of life, communities of scientific knowledge-making, communities that embody expertise.

Keywords: Collins, STS, socialness, forms of life, scientific knowledge

Приглашение к гуманистической социологии Гарри Коллинза

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Гарри Коллинз разрабатывает гуманистическую социологию науки, техники и экспертизы. Ее исходный пункт состоит в том, что отличительной чертой человека является социальность (“socialness”), которая становится возможной благодаря языку. Однако язык обретает значимость лишь внутри социальной формы жизни (“form of life”). Следовательно, лишь человеческие существа способны выступать в качестве коллективных репрезентаций – и, стало быть, лишь они способны быть и творить знание. Коллинз последовательно показывает, что экспертиза реальна и существует исключительно в формах жизни. Отсюда вытекает нормативное следствие: если общество желает обладать научным знанием, оно обязано защищать и уважать целостность тех человеческих форм жизни, которые представляют собой сообщества производства научного знания – сообщества, воплощающие в себе экспертизу.

Ключевые слова: Коллинз, исследование науки и технологий, социальность, формы жизни, научное знание

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Harry Collins' sociological project centers on a conception of the human being as, uniquely, a social being. This conception is set out in the pivotal article, in which he introduces the term "socialness" [Collins, 1998]. Among all the beings of which we are aware, only human beings are *capable* of membership in a society. Only human beings are capable of being a collective representation. Therefore, only human beings are capable of being a scientist and doing science; only human beings are capable of being a gravitational wave physicist and doing gravitational wave physics; only human beings are capable of being a sociologist and doing sociology.

Collins' sociology is humanistic sociology. This is the humanistic sociological tradition represented by Peter Berger's *Invitation to Sociology: A Humanistic Perspective* [Berger, 1963], of which Collins acknowledges the influence [Collins, 2019, p. 65]. Berger suggested that sociology was humanistic in its scientific values. He also argued that it should be humanistic in its epistemological approach to the world. While defining the situation of sociology as a "scientific enterprise," Berger wrote that "the discipline has other traits that assign it to the immediate vicinity of the humanities," even though, he still insisted, not belonging "fully" to the humanities. What made sociology epistemologically humanistic, according to Berger, was that it was about "the human condition itself"; that is, "what it means to be a man" and "what it means to be a man in a particular situation" [Berger, 1963, p. 167]. The keyword, here, is "means."

Berger writes that

> One cannot fully grasp the political world unless one understands it as a confidence game, or the stratification system unless one sees its character as a costume party. One cannot achieve a sociological perception of religious institutions unless one recalls how as a child one put on masks and frightened the wits out of one's contemporaries by the simple expedient of saying "boo" [Ibid., p. 165].

There is a potential difference between how Berger characterizes understanding in the three above examples of the political world, stratification, and religion. In the first two examples, understanding of an institutionalized pattern of social action is achieved by understanding of it *as* an instance of something else, understanding that this also *counts* as that, that this game is also that game. This means understanding the definition of the situation and therefore the meaning of what is being done (see also [Ibid., p. 20]). But in describing the example of religion, Berger suggests that sociological understanding requires "recall" and, in particular, "recall how." This could mean that, in order to understand religion sociologically, one must be able to call up in oneself past embodied experience of spooking or being spooked, being frightened by something one cannot see, or by a magic word. Is the main thing about "boo" the onomatopoeia? Or does "recalling how" involve recalling how one went about it



as a practice, and how one learnt to do it? Collins would suggest that what spookiness is, sociologically, can be learned by talking about it. The opposite view is that, if one has never jumped in fright or experienced glee in making someone jump, then one cannot understand "boo" and one can't understand the phenomenology of religion. Berger argues that the social meaning of religion is the protection that it offers from what is beyond sight, or from chaos and death, by its provision of a socially constructed reality. This reality forms a sacred canopy as nomized, "humanly significant," or sacred, cosmos ([Berger, 1969, p. 21, 25, 114]; see also [Berger, Luckmann, 1967]).

The social meaning of awe (or fright) is not the same thing as the feeling of awe, even though the social meaning depends on some people having had that feeling, because it depends on the social practices of "boo" and religion. What is social is what is shared. So the sociologist does not need to know what it is personally, experientially like to be spooked, only what it is socially understood to be like. What is social is meaningful within a form of life. Therefore, what is social can be conveyed in language, even though it can never be rendered entirely explicit in language; it is contained implicitly in the usage of the language. To understand a form of life is to be able to fluently interact with participants using the practice language of the form of life in which they participate.

This is where a gap opens within humanistic sociology, between different conceptions of this project, which were not always, including by Berger and Luckmann, entirely clearly separated. In *Changing Order* [Collins, 1992] Collins notes that "There is a relationship between phenomenology and the ideas of Wittgenstein" [Ibid., p. 25, note 13]. This became apparent with regard to Hubert Dreyfus's phenomenological critique of Artificial Intelligence, which Collins found inspiring, but ultimately misdirected in its emphasis on embodiment rather than social language-use [Ibid., p. 28, note 22; Collins, 2018].

Phenomenology seeks to unify knowledge with being. In this way, phenomenology suggests a sociological task of finding the making of meaning in the flow of everyday social life [Berger, Luckmann, 1967]. Collins seeks to understand the "intermingling of language and social life," conceptual order and social order [Collins, 1992, p. 24, note 7]. Collins treats the phenomenon sociologically at stake not as private experience but social meaning.

Collins demonstrates how Peter Winch's critique of social science can become a positive program for sociology rather than a negative limit. Collins argues that sociology concerns what constitutes forms of life *as* forms of life. Forms of life are made of language. Therefore, social relations are internal relations, logical relations of entailment among meanings within a form of life. *And*, logical relations are made and sustained socially. Collins writes that Winch shows "that social relations are embodied logical relations while logical relations are the abstract

counterpart of social relations" [Collins, 1992, p. 27, note 18]. This is *living* language in use in social life. It is language-use as containing tacit knowledge [Collins, 2011]. The use of the language requires knowledge, contained, but implicit, in use. To understand language is to glean tacit meaning. This tacit, unexplicated, meaning, consists of what is "of course" in a form of life [Berger, 1963, p. 47]. Of-courseness, or the natural attitude, is an important moment in the social process of reification whereby human beings turn action into practice, rule, and institution. Closure of controversy allows knowledge to enter the domain of background assumptions. This domain is contained in a form of life, its practices, and practice-language. The Science & Technology Studies (STS) metaphor of the "black box" is what phenomenology identifies as taken-for-granted reality.

Collins agrees with phenomenologists that social things are ways of being. He further agrees that ways of being, and the practices in which they inhere and which produce them, are intrinsically open. In this way, all practices contrast with a pure theoretical system and with the "internal workings of a developed computer" [Collins, 1992, p. 25, note 11]. Experiment, as practice, is an open system, as shown by the great difficulty of separating 'signal' from 'noise', meaningful order from chaos. The problem is separating out and thereby constructing a phenomenon, and through that, a fact, from the open flow of life. Doing so is "cosmization," the transformation of chaos into cosmos, or a meaningful order of things, in which phenomena are known and there is an order that can be comprehended [Berger, 1969, p. 26–28, 114].

Every event is at the edge of socially constructed reality and introduces uncertainty. This makes for the problem of induction. Collins is interested in people whose job it is to extend cosmos, to produce scientific knowledge, and thereby, socio-cognitive order. The production of knowledge, Collins argues, is a practice, which means it is open not only in the sense of growth but in the sense that it is capable of producing genuine newness. Rules are algorithms but following the rules is not algorithmic [Collins, 1992]. Rule-following as a practice must go beyond the rules. Science is a (multiplicity of) practice(s) and therefore not algorithmic [Ibid.].

The difficulty that science faces as a social practice of cosmization is that it does not provide nomos. Steven Shapin [Shapin, 2008] traces how the secular institutionalization of the role of scientist, associated with the research university and with industry, emerged as a conceptual innovation or innovation in meaning *and* innovation in social being. This was a movement away from claiming religious, or spiritual, and moral authority and from calling to, morally ordinary, job [Ibid., p. 21–91].

Weber's [Weber, 1958] lecture, "Science as a Vocation," according to Shapin [Shapin, 2019], marks a historical moment in which the attempt to connect science to answers to meaningful existence was



declining in significance within the definition of science as a form of life and the role of the scientist. But Weber nevertheless thought that science was worthwhile as a personal commitment, or vocation. That science was not entirely de-moralized [Fevre, 2000], was indicated by Robert K. Merton's notion of "the ethos of science" or of science as having a distinctive "normative structure" [Merton, 1973]. Merton suggested that the scientific ethos had significance beyond the social institutions and professional community of science because there was an affinity between the normative structure of science and that of democracy. But for Merton the key implication of that affinity was that science needed a broader democratic society in which to thrive.

Collins' Empirical Programme of Relativism (EPOR) was different from Mertonian sociology of science not only because of Collins' willingness to pursue the sociology of knowledge but also because of a difference in style. Whereas Mertonian sociology was reverent in its tone toward science, the new British sociology was irreverent, in its ambition to treat scientific knowledge as ordinary. In this way, the sociology of scientific knowledge and the empirical programme in relativism followed the Chicago symbolic interactionists in a deflationary way of describing the practices of professional experts and high-status or official organizations. Alvin Gouldner illustrated the difference between Chicago and Harvard/Columbia sociologists' orientation to the professions by the contrast between book titles of their respective studies of medical education: "Harvard and Columbia have soberly called two of their most important works *The Student-Physician* and *Experiment Perilous*, while the Chicagoans have irreverently labelled their own recent study of medical students the *Boys in White*" ([Goulder, 1973, p. 17]; see [Fox, 2019; Merton et al., 1957; Becker et al., 1961]).

Berger observed in his 1963 book that "science is an almost sacred entity among Americans in general and American academicians in particular." Berger thought that it was pursuit of this symbolic status that motivated many social scientists' "fixation on methodology", or fetishism of the natural sciences, out of which he hoped sociology would mature [Berger, 1963, p. 13]. Collins also criticizes "magical scientism" which equates being scientific with applying statistical techniques [Collins, 2019, p. 22]. Collins defends the claim of sociology to be a science. He acknowledges that statistics have an important place in sociology in illustration of relations within society. But he argues that statistical correlations are not the foundation of sociological knowledge. While statistics may indicate a relationship, they do not in themselves constitute the relationship. This is true of natural phenomena. Epidemiology does not render laboratory studies unnecessary. But there is also the inherent difference between social and natural phenomena, which is the constitutive meaningfulness of social phenomena. As Winch argued, social relations are internal because they are relations of ideas: "social relations

between men exist only in and through their ideas" [Winch, 2008, p. 115]. Winch explicates the internal relationship between the command and the act of obedience. The meaning of the act as an act of obedience is internal to the act and to the command, since command and act are only comprehensible in terms of each other [Ibid., p. 116–117]. So sociological knowledge is the comprehension of relations of entailment of meanings within a cultural system of ideas or concepts.

As logical relations, social relations can be known with great certainty. If this is not absolute certainty, this is because forms of life undergo change. Forms of life are incomplete totalities, in the process of being continually remade, and this change is informed by the fact that forms of life exist in dynamic relation to other forms of life. Change in forms of life necessarily involves changes in meaning.

Winch says, "Part of the opposition one feels to the idea that men can be related to each other through their actions in at all the same kind of way as propositions can be related to each other is probably due to an inadequate conception of what logical relations between propositions themselves are" [Ibid., p. 117]. Here, Winch opens the door to Collins' project of a sociological epistemology: "it is only from their roots in this actual flesh-and-blood intercourse that those formal systems draw such life as they have" [Ibid., p. 118]. Collins realized the meaning of this statement insofar as it suggested a completely new way of thinking about, and going about, epistemology. This involves understanding relations of meaning within a form of life, and so it must be necessary to gain knowledge of the form of life. It must be necessary to study the form of life as, and in, life, in order to understand how its forms are practiced, or, rather, the practical meaning of forms.

So whereas analytical, or logical empiricist, philosophers formalized and hypostatized scientific method, including notions of experiment and replication, Collins argued that a practice, such as experiment and replication of experiments, could never be completely understood algorithmically or through the elaboration of rules. Instead, he sought to show experiment as practiced by an experimental community as a form of life. The same insight that enabled him to understand Winch's implications for a sociological epistemology enabled Collins to identify the experimenter's regress precisely as a problem that arises in practice. When the question of what has been found about the physical world becomes a question of the criteria of evaluation of the validity of the experiment itself, this is a kind of regress, or reflexivity. This reflexivity reflects the internality of social relations as social meanings. The result of the experiment is internally, in its meaning, related to the experiment itself.

Winch distinguishes the example of obedience and command from the example of hearing 'thunder.' The term "thunder" is "theory-impregnated" because the ability to use it to identify the cause of a sound depends on holding beliefs such as in its relation to lightning and electricity,



or, one could alternatively say, fire and gods. The idea of thunder is connected with other ideas. But Winch draws the distinction that "An event's character as an act of obedience is *intrinsic* to it in a way which is not true of an event's character as a clap of thunder" [Winch, 2008, p. 116–117. Emphasis in original]. Collins shows how "thunder," or a gravitational wave, exists in internal relations with other ideas and is therefore constituted within a form of life. What is "intrinsic" to whatever a gravitational wave is, apart from the idea, is not the business of sociology. Constructivism is intrinsic to sociology.

Gods and gravitational waves exist in different kinds of form of life, different in their concept-practices. An individual may inhabit multiple forms of life, and therefore alternate between their concept-practices, while these forms of life remain, in themselves, separate and incommensurable [Berger, 1963, p. 51–52]. It is the possibility of alternation that makes sociology possible and shows the necessity of methodological relativism for sociological comprehension of the phenomenon of society ([Collins, 2019, p. 65–67], citing [Berger, 1963]). The notion relates to the concept of participant comprehension [Collins, 1984; Collins, 2019, p. 54], as a formulation of what Collins and Evans would later call "interactional expertise" [Collins, Evans, 2007]. Methodological relativism corresponds to the ontology of society as a complex, fractal, multiplicity of forms of life alongside and within forms of life [Collins, 2019, p. 8–13]. The difference between the concept of thunder as god and the concept of thunder as electricity is also the differences of chains of meanings, concepts, practices that are internally related within each of these forms of life. This difference therefore corresponds to vast differences in ways of living and being and vast differences in the "of courses" of each social way of living.

Sociology knows social life only to the extent that the sociologist is able to immerse themselves in that social life, which means in the socialization processes of that form of life, thereby becoming socialized. But, Collins argues, it is possible to be socialized in a form of life to the extent that one understands that form of life, without becoming a participant in it. This is what makes alternation possible and the complex fractal of forms of life possible.

And the way in which meanings, and forms of life, are practico-logically interrelated may create resistance to change because of widening and intersecting stakes and may create a certain brittleness or fracturability in social relations, due to ways in which "of courses" interdepend. Science is a form of solidarity. This solidarity involves expertise or know-how and cultural fluency. It also involves a moral ethos or collective aspiration. This suggests that the acquisition of expertise is also, tacitly, socialization into a moral order [Ibid., p. 101]. Trust occurs within moral order [Shapin, 1994]. It is the fact that practices, including science, cannot be fully stated algorithmically that makes practices

trust-dependent. The practice of science contains tacit knowledge and therefore is trust-dependent. Collins' ethnographic studies and Steven Shapin's historical studies are both concerned with the moral fabric of scientific community and role or being. Both Collins and Shapin emphasize what science shares with other forms of life, that is its ordinary socialness.

What demarcates science distinguishes it as a form of life and makes sociology a science, even though its way of knowing obedience is in many ways completely other to the way of knowing thunder as caused by electricity. Except of course it isn't completely different because both involve internal relations of meaning and therefore knowing as interpreting. But sociology is methodologically different from physics because the things that it studies are ontologically different from those of physics. This is because social things are *constituted by* their meanings, because their very existence depends on language and meaning [Winch, 2008, p. 117]. Scientific facts are social things, and this is how they are designated by sociologists, but not by physicists, because sociology and physics have different constitutive goals. They are different language-games. But this does reflect the real difference between social things and physical things, or things-understood-as-social not things-understood-as-physical.

There is a real difference between social things and physical things (*qua* physical) because only human beings have socialness. This means that the existence of social things depends on human beings. This is because only human beings use language as part of their form of life. So only human beings can do concept-practices and concept-being. Only human beings can be concept beings. Only human beings can be a concept.

Being a concept requires expertise. One must know how to do it in order to be it. This is participatory expertise. It is knowing how to use concepts in the course of a practice. The key expertise that a sociologist must acquire, through methodological relativism, alternation, and immersion, is interactional: knowing how to use concepts in order to understand a practice and its practitioners [Collins, Evans, 2007; Collins, 2011; Collins, 2020].

Practices are normative. Normative judgment is inherent in practices. This is because practices are teleological. Forms of life, and institutions, have constitutive goals, or what Collins [Collins, 2023, p. 12] calls "formative aspirations." Since they have purpose, practices are value-laden. This is part of their theory-ladenness and knowledge-ladenness which may be tacit, i.e. assumed in the practice and contained in the practice-language. Collins argues that science is value-laden, and that at its core is a moral "formative aspiration" to tell the truth [Ibid., p. 145]. This seems to be close to Merton's conception of the "ethos of science" and norms of science (cf. [Collins, 1982, esp. 301]). Merton and Collins both argue that there is a connection between the moral order of science and that



of democracy. Collins emphasizes the dependency of democracy on science. These connections are interdependencies of meaning within and across intersecting forms of life, morphing to different polities. Shapin argues that experiment emerged as a practice meaningfully related to moral ways of being, a key such example being the early modern English gentleman [Shapin, 1994; Shapin and Schaffer, 1986]. Yaron Ezrahi [Ezrahi, 1990] traces intersecting meanings of visual witnessing and transparency between science and political democracy.

In 1963 science was "almost sacred" in America ([Berger, 1963, p. 13]; see also [Welsh, 2000]). Yet sociology is ambivalent toward sacredness. It may be argued, sociologically, that social order depends on sacralizing, because this is a crucial moment of social world-making, protecting core values that provide the focus of allegiance and commitment for a form of life, or society, and for giving anchoring legitimacy to chains of "of courses" that extend through social life [Berger, 1969; Berger, Luckmann, 1967; Shils, 2016]. If science is to receive social trust, so that assent is collectively forthcoming to social acts associated with this core institution, and people participate in the actions it legitimizes, such as childhood vaccinations, then science must be sacred.

Acts like vaccinating one's children contain meaning as what John Locke called "tacit consent." As Carole Pateman [Pateman, 1985, p. 72] puts it "Tacit consent can be inferred from the fact that people are going peacefully about their everyday lives" including using government-provided infrastructure such as roads. The meaning of such everyday acts contains allegiance to a polity. Getting vaccinated is polimorphic action (see [Collins, Kusch, 1999]). It is associated with social identity and membership of a form of life.

But not everything we trust, or ways we give tacit consent, involves the sacred. I trust that water will come out of my kitchen tap but I do not hold the Water Board sacred. It may be said that I have confidence rather than trust, or system trust rather than personal trust [Luhmann, 1990; Giddens, 1990, p. 83–88]. But is it true that this kind of system trust can be entirely decoupled from personal trust and de-moralized? Or, does my trust in public utilities have to do with ethics of bureaucratic impartiality, technical competence as a value, and public service that I tacitly ascribe to the people working in the utility? Is it possible that my confidence in such background technologies and routines of everyday life is weakened if I feel that the privatized water company is mostly interested in lining its shareholders' pockets or if I suspect that the government is corrupt? It would seem that the normative commitments that I ascribe to the Water Board, professions, and bureaucracies, that underly my confidence in technological systems, are meaningfully related to the normative commitments that I ascribe to science and scientists (see also [Collins, 1982, p. 301]). And those meanings may be mutually determining so that my trust in science might be informed by my opinion of other

meaningfully-related concepts and institutions such as the Water Board. If so, then, what is sacred about science and the Water Board has to do with the structure of value that is part of the socially constructed reality of a form of life.

If science must be sacred in order to be trusted and must exist within a sacred order of specially elevated and protected values, then this poses a problem for science, if science is disenchanting and disenchanted (cf. [Weber, 1958]). Science drew sacredness from other social sources. The Natural History Museum in London is a cathedral of science. Scientific institutions drew legitimacy from religion even while differentiating from religious institutions. Scientific institutions, including universities, are often associated with the state and so draw upon the symbolic authority of the nation-state. Berger [Berger, 1963, p. 44] noted that sociology is rendered "respectable" by its "affiliation in university, business and government".

Humanistic sociology is disenchanting. Berger gave the analogy between religion and a children's game of "boo" within his argument that the sociological attitude should be comic. According to Berger, "the social scientist who does not perceive this comic dimension of reality is going to miss essential features of it" [Ibid., p. 165]. Sociology is a comic form because it is deflationary. It exposes the ordinariness of all social action, and therefore provides a profane view of the sacred. In this way, it provides a version of Hans Christian Anderson's story of "The Emperor's New Clothes." Ezrahi [Ezrahi, 1990, p. 108–127] argues that Anderson created a key allegory of modernity, expressing the new mode of public witnessing and holding accountable, shared across science and democracy. The connection between laughter and humanism to which Berger alludes is symbolically and historically close [Hietalahti, 2024; Berger, 2014]. This laughter is part of the language-game of humanistic sociology and is part of its honesty [Berger, 1963, p. 165–166].

The Empirical Program of Relativism may be seen as developing and extending the Chicago symbolic interactionists' deflationary exposure of the professions. The kind of solidarity within which this deflationary humanistic laughter is not treated as a threat and as destructive is the kind of solidarity in which the two moments of sociology – comedic disenchantment and the necessity of the sacred – can be more easily alternated between. But humanistic sociology also poses the question of whether social order can mature sufficiently to dispense with sacredness and engage in "a mellowing in self-understanding" and an "ironical skepticism concerning its own undertakings" [Ibid., p. 164–165].

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