

## RANDALL COLLINS

### AN AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

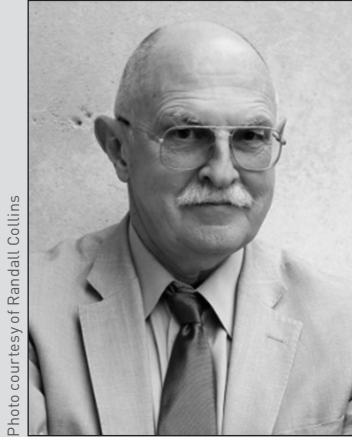


Photo courtesy of Randall Collins

I started becoming a sociologist at an early age. My father was working for military intelligence at the end of World War II and then joined the State Department as a Foreign Service Officer. One of my earliest memories is of arriving in Berlin to join him in the summer of 1945. My sisters and I couldn't play in the park because there was live ammunition everywhere, and, one day, Russian soldiers came into our backyard to dig up a corpse. This gave me a sense that conflict is important and violence always possible.

My father's subsequent tours of duty took us to the Soviet Union, back to Germany (then under American military occupation), to Spain, and South America. In between foreign assignments we would live in the States, so I went back and forth between being an

ordinary American kid and being a privileged foreign visitor. I think this resulted in a certain amount of detachment in viewing social relationships. As I got older, the diplomatic life looked less dramatic and more like an endless round of formal etiquette in which people never talked about the important politics going on; the split between backstage secrecy and front-stage ceremonial made me ready to appreciate Erving Goffman.

When I was too old to accompany my parents abroad, I was sent to a prep school in New England. This taught me another great sociological reality: the existence of stratification. Many of the other students came from families in the Social Register, and it began to dawn on me that my father was not in the same social class as the ambassadors and undersecretaries of state whose children I sometimes met.

I went on to Harvard, where I changed my major half a dozen times. I studied literature and tried being a playwright and novelist. I went from mathematics to philosophy; I read Freud and planned to become a psychiatrist. I finally majored in social relations, which covered sociology, social psychology, and anthropology. Taking courses from Talcott Parsons settled me onto a path. He covered virtually everything, from the micro to the macro and across the range of world history. What I got from him was not so much his own theory but rather the ideal of what sociology could do. He also provided me with some important pieces of cultural capital: that Weber was less concerned with the Protestant Ethic than he was with comparing the dynamics of all the world religions and that Durkheim asked the key question when he tried to uncover the precontractual basis of social order.

I thought I wanted to become a psychologist and went to Stanford, but a year of implanting electrodes in rats' brains convinced me that sociology was a better place to study human beings. I switched universities and arrived in Berkeley in the summer of 1964, just in time to join the civil rights movement. By the time the free speech movement emerged on campus in the fall, we were veterans of sit-ins, and being arrested for another cause felt emotionally energizing when one could do it in solidarity with hundreds of others. I was analyzing the sociology of conflict at the same time that we were experiencing it. As the Vietnam War and the racial conflicts at home escalated, the opposition movement began to repudiate its nonviolent