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Boat race: rhythm and the possibility of collective performance[1]

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Abstract

Many sociologists have observed the close connection between coordination and rhythm. In order to accomplish a communal task, participants need to develop a common rhythm if they are to coordinate their actions. Indeed, the harder the collective task, the more critical – but difficult – it is for participants to develop a common rhythm in order to synchronize their actions. Rhythm is thus an important and recurrent feature of social performance. This article explores the ways in which participants try to generate common rhythm in order to execute collective performances. To this end, the paper takes a single sporting example. It examines a decisive period in the 153rd Oxford and Cambridge Boat Race in 2007 to examine how a small social group, the Cambridge crew, struggled to create and maintain a rhythm in order to maximize their rowing performance.

Keywords: Collective action; Cambridge University Boat Club; rowing; sport; ethnography

Introduction: the sociology of rhythm

Sociologists have long noticed the connection between rhythm and solidarity. For instance, in an important passage in *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, Durkheim observed that synchronized bodily movements – rhythms – were essential to group formation.

> Individual minds cannot come into contact and communicate with each other except by coming out of themselves; but they cannot do this except by movements. So it is the homogeneity of these movements that gives the group consciousness of itself and consequently makes it exist. When this homogeneity is once established and these movements have once

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> taken a stereotyped form, they serve to symbolize the corresponding representations. But they symbolize them only because they have aided in forming them. (Durkheim 1964: 230–1)

By moving together, participants physically demonstrated their unity and the very evidence of that unity generated a feeling of togetherness. William McNeill affirmed the connection between rhythm and solidarity, recalling his war-time experiences as a conscript when he and his fellow recruits were frequently ordered to march 'whenever our officers ran out of training films'. McNeill notes with some irony: 'A more useless exercise would be hard to imagine' (McNeill 1995: 1). Nevertheless, McNeill describes that in the course of those long marches on hot, dusty roads, his recruit cadre experienced a 'swelling out'; 'words are inadequate to describe the emotion aroused by the prolonged movement in unison' (McNeill 1995: 2). For McNeill, 'something visceral was at work' which he tried to capture with the concept of 'muscular bonding' (McNeill 1995: 2). Like Durkheim, McNeill recorded the way in which a sense of togetherness was generated through this collective rhythmical activity, even though it was objectively pointless. Yet, by marching together, McNeill and his fellow recruits became a group.[2]

Elaborating upon both Durkheim and Erving Goffman (Collins 2004: 16–24, 32–40), Randall Collins has emphasized the point. For him, 'rhythmic sychronization is correlated with solidarity' (Collins 2004: 76). However, Collins does not just note the fact that rhythm tends to stimulate a feeling of solidarity in the way Durkheim and McNeill imply. He claims that rhythm is essential to the successful execution of 'interaction rituals'; 'At the centre of an interaction ritual is the process in which participants develop a mutual focus of attention and become entrained in each others' present bodily micro-rhythms and emotions' (Collins 2004: 47). For Collins, it is only through compatible bodily positions, gestures and actions, including speech, that the participants in these encounters can co-ordinate themselves; 'successful talk has no gaps and no overlaps; no embarrassing pauses between speakers or within utterances, and a minimal amount of struggle over who gets the floor to speak' (Collins 2004: 68). It might be possible to extrapolate from Collins' point. While rhythm can stimulate a sense of group solidarity, co-ordinated collective performance is possible only through the shared discovery of precise rhythmic patterns. Participants in ensemble productions have to synchronize their actions, finding a rhythm of one kind or another, or they would not be able to engage in coherent, sequenced social practice at all. They would interrupt each other, cut across or physically obstruct one another. Shared rhythm seems to be critical to all joint performances. Moreover, the more complex the performance, the more important it is for participants to find a common rhythm and yet, the more difficult it is for them to attain and sustain it. For instance, scholars from a number of disciplines have demonstrated the subtle and difficult

micro-techniques which musicians recurrently use to orchestrate their playing (eg Keil 1995; Loehr and Palmer 2007, 2009; Schutz 1964: 161).

If rhythm is indeed central to concerto performance, then it is an issue which seems to address a – perhaps *the* – core question in sociology: how is collective action possible at all (Parsons 1966)? How is it that humans are able to engage in coherent social practice? The exploration of rhythm is, therefore, also an examination of the conditions of collective performance (and action) itself. There are, of course, an infinite number of human practices which might be used to explore this connection between rhythm and performance; dance, music, talk, military drills, carousing, religious worship or sex. Indeed, Michal Pagis has intriguingly demonstrated how Vipasanna meditation is ultimately an ensemble activity, in which silent participants, nevertheless, successfully co-ordinate their meditation through bodily imitation in order to reach higher states of individual self-consciousness (Pagis 2010: 318–9). In order to explore the connection between rhythm and collective performance, we have chosen a sporting example to which rhythm is essential: rowing. There are a number of team sports which require high levels of inter-subjective coordination; cycling, American football and set plays in all field sports require team members to synchronize their actions, and each displays collective rhythm. However, it is difficult to conceive a sport which relies so heavily on bodily synchronization and, therefore, on rhythm as rowing. Other teams aspire to close physical coordination in order to maximize their performances but a rowing crew requires synchronicity to perform at all. Moreover, while dance troupes display very high levels of coordination, they have the advantage of operating on land in spaces where the participants are separate from each other. Rowing crews operate in the confined space of a racing shell on water where mistakes are magnified, upsetting the balance of the boat and immediately impacting on the whole crew. Rowing then presents a potentially rich and possibly under-investigated form of social activity in which the relationship between collective performance and rhythm might be investigated more fully.

To attain an adequate level of analytical detail, one ethnographic example is examined here: the 153rd Cambridge and Oxford Boat Race on 7 April 2007.[3] Indeed, a decisive six-minute period of the race between the fourth and tenth minutes, when Cambridge initially trailing the Oxford boat by over half a length changed their rhythm and rowed through their rivals, constitutes the focus of attention. This intense sporting episode is investigated in order to explore the micro-techniques which social groups employ to generate rhythm and, therefore, to coordinate social practice, building upon the analysis of Durkheim, McNeill and Collins. It is accepted that, in the grand sweep of human history, Cambridge's victory over Oxford was a parochial, even trivial, event. Yet, sociologists, Erving Goffman prominent among them, have consistently drawn profound philosophical conclusions from apparently insignificant social acts (e.g Goffman 1961). Similarly, Cambridge's discovery of rhythm

may constitute what Wittgenstein would have called a 'perspicuous representation' (Wittgenstein 1972: §22). It was an arresting event, not only interesting in itself, but potentially useful in illustrating the ways in which ensemble performances are facilitated through shared rhythms more generally. Crucially, the study is intended to show that while the search for rhythm is a universal in human social interaction, it is extremely difficult to attain; collective performance is a possibility not a certainty. The article provides an account of the race itself and then explores crew politics which informed the entire process of training, the crew's concept of rhythm, the problematic attempts to institute this rhythm and the very unusual – even desperate – method of crew selection as the Blue Boat struggled to find its rhythm. These four themes represent a convenient analytical division of the ethnographic material but they also broadly correspond to the chronology of events leading up to the Boat Race in April.

The research: the 2007 Boat Race, minutes 4 to 10

The University Boat Race takes place on a four mile course from Putney to Mortlake on the River Thames. The predominant feature of the racecourse is a large thumb-shaped bend (the Surrey Bend) which forms its middle, two-mile section. Hammersmith Bridge crosses the river at the apex of this bend and is approximately half way. Typically, the race is decided around this bend as, indeed, was the case in 2007. In that year, Cambridge started badly and rowed poorly for the first four minutes of the race so that, even though the Fulham bend favoured them, they trailed Oxford. In those first minutes, Cambridge's blade-work was ragged and the crew rushed up the slide so that they rowed short ineffective strokes. However, in the 4th minute something noteworthy began to happen. The Two-man,[4] Dan O'Shaughnessy, called out: 'Shape, Range, Drive!'. This was his call for rhythm established in training. The cox, Rebecca Dowbiggin, supported this call for rhythm and relaxation as the race recording on the boat's microphone reveals:

4:38 Yeah, good boys
I want to move again on them, stay loose
4:49 Feet together now
Feet, feet, feet
Sitting right level with them
5:01 On our rhythm, on our rhythm, on our rhythm.
5:09 That's good Cambridge, that's good Cambridge.
5:12 'Yoohoo' (*The Stroke Thorsten Engelmann's call*)
5:15 That's what Thorsten likes: good rhythm. Absorb now, absorb, absorb, good boys, good boys sit up for our own push. Legs down, legs down, good boys, good boys four more on the push legs, legs, legs good boys.[5]

It is hard to over-emphasize the importance of this sequence of events and especially Thorsten Engelmann's cry of 'Yoohoo'. Subsequently, and quite independently of one another, crew members identified this moment as critical to the whole race.

> As we were taking a move, I heard Thorsten yell 'Yoohoo!' which was our code for 'That feels good'. The more I think about it, the more important that moment seems. It drew us all out of our quiet personal boxes, where everyone was sinking in his own doubts and pain, and made the process of rowing collaborative again. One of the most important things you can do to get rhythm is talk to your teammates. It's essential just to let each other know you're there, and that you all have a shared goal and a common fate. As soon as Thorsten said 'Yoohoo!' and we started moving, Dan [O'Shaughnessy] started to yell, and our collective confidence built up. It is reassuring to know that you are not alone (Jake Cornelius, personal communication, 28 May 2009).[6]

Thorsten's cry signified the fact that the crew was beginning to row well. Cambridge had found their rhythm and picked up boat speed. As Cambridge lengthened their stroke and began to row more smoothly, they came more or less level with Oxford along the Hammersmith Reach just before the Bridge. It is true that, as the bend, typically worth up to a full boat length, went in their favour, Oxford were able to push out to about a third of a length in front but they were never able to impose themselves on Cambridge who remained relaxed throughout. Consequently, as the crews rowed into the Chiswick Reach, Cambridge began to move on Oxford in the 9th minute. Under this pressure, Oxford's rowing became notably untidy and, at 10 minutes and 15 seconds, Cambridge went ahead for the first time in the race. They extended their lead to the finish.

Crew politics

The 2007 Boat Race was decided in a very short period of six minutes when Cambridge eventually found their rhythm but this period can be understood only by examining the dense subterranean network of practices, concepts and processes which took place for months before the race, as the Blue Boat prepared for the event. The successful collective performance on 7 April 2007 was possible only given months of training and preparation. An investigation of this process begins to provide an explanation of why Cambridge were eventually able to find a rhythm but only having lost it in the opening minutes of the race. Two decisive features dominated the Cambridge University Boat Clubs' (CUBC) training for the 2007 race and must be recognized in any explanation of the rhythm which Cambridge discovered around the

Hammersmith Bend. Since the 1980s, the Boat Race has been increasingly dominated by international oarsmen but the Cambridge crew was unusual. The 2007 Cambridge crew included one former Olympic gold medalist and world champion (Kieran West), two reigning world champions (Sebastian Schulte and Thorsten Engelmann), two Canadian internationals (Kip McDaniel and Dan O'Shaughnessy), and their President (Tom James) who went on to win Olympic gold in Beijing the following year. The remaining two members were Pete Champion, who had represented Great Britain in the under-23s, and Jake Cornelius, a former Stanford oarsman. The crew's pedigree was impressive even for the Boat Race. Yet, the quality and experience of its crew presented internal problems for CUBC. Given their experience and reputation in the world of rowing West, Schulte, Engelmann and James dominated the crew and, indeed, the entire selection and training process. As a British Olympic gold-medallist at the Sydney Olympics (when Sir Steven Redgrave had won his fifth gold medal and the GB Rowing team had its most successful games), West's authority over crew, in particular, was considerable. Since it was never really in doubt that they would be selected for the boat in April, they enjoyed near-unassailable status with CUBC.

The Blue Boat is selected from approximately 40 rowers who initially come forward for a process of rigorous trials from September the previous year (although only ten to twelve individuals ever have a realistic chance of being selected). As with all rowing eights, the most important seats are in the stern: Stroke and Seven Seat set the rating and rhythm while the Six Seat establishes that pattern for the rest of the crew while supporting Stroke. The Five Seat is technically less demanding but critical in providing the boat's power and speed. Together these four Seats are called the 'Stern Four' and

Figure I: *The crew*

Bow	Kip McDaniel
No. 2	Dan O'Shaughnessy
No. 3	Pete Champion
No. 4	Jake Cornelius
No. 5	Tom James
No. 6	Kieran West
No. 7	Sebastian Schulte
Stroke	Thorsten Engelmann
Cox	Russ Glenn/ Rebecca Dowbiggin

the best oarsmen are usually put here. Accordingly, West, Schulte, Engelmann and James quickly formed themselves into a recognized Stern Four. The Bow Four oarsmen follow the Stern Four, with the Bow and Two Seats typically reserved for smaller, technical oarsman. Given their superior experience and skill, the Stern Four would be critical in establishing Cambridge's rhythm. Their supremacy meant a significant performance gap between them and the next four fastest oarsmen, as clearly demonstrated at the Fours Head of the River Race on 18 November 2006. While Cambridge's fastest Four (comprising James, West, Schulte and Engelmann, with Russ Glenn as coxswain) proved to be quicker than all other coxed (and even coxless) Fours on the river with a time of 18 minutes and 22 seconds, its second fastest Four lagged almost a minute behind, finishing in 19 minutes dead. This result revealed the extent of the discrepancy between the experience and expertise of the Stern and Bow Fours. By contrast, the finishing times of Oxford's first and second Fours were only six seconds apart. There was a very steep hierarchy in the crew, with the Stern Four forming a dominant clique over the rest of the CUBC squad.

Indeed, the Stern Four dominated not only the other rowers but the coaching staff itself. Head coach, Duncan Holland, was keen to avoid the route taken by Oxford coach Daniel Topolski in 1987, when Topolski chose to confront the most senior oarsmen who subsequently walked out as part of the now-famous 'Oxford mutiny' (although, to everyone's surprise, Oxford still went on to win the 1987 Boat Race with an inferior crew) (Topolski 1990). Instead, Holland sought to keep the peace but proved unable to manage the strongest characters in his crew effectively. McDaniel's reflections, and comparisons with other international coaches, are telling in this respect:

> The more I think about it. The more it seems obvious to me that it was *all* about leadership from the very top. Harry Parker, Mike Spracklen, Jurgen Gröbler – I have never seen (and wouldn't expect to see with the last one) *any* such mutiny. It was simply a lack of competence – or the perception of competence – with Duncan that led to the problems. We all were arrogant and self-serving – but a strong, respected leader would have easily corralled us. (McDaniel, personal correspondence, 9 February 2010; emphasis in original).

Holland was never able to exert authority over the crew, and especially the Stern Four who actually exercized informal control throughout.

In addition to the presence of a status elite within the crew, the entire process of selection and training was informed by a second important fact which only accentuated the inequalities in the crew and also complicated the discovery of rhythm. Cambridge was on a losing streak. Five of the eight oarsmen had rowed and lost the Boat Race in 2006, even as firm favorites and as one of the strongest crews ever fielded. James (No.5) had lost the race three

times already; Schulte (No.7) twice. Moreover, the chief coach, a relative novice to CUBC, had lost his first Boat Race in 2006. It is important to recognize the pressure which losing placed on CUBC. Crews from CUBC often compete in other events in the rowing calendar. However, the sole purpose of CUBC is to win the Boat Race and, indeed, this role constitutes one of its founding ordinances. CUBC – and especially the self-selected Stern Four – was under intense pressure, therefore, in 2007. Indeed, the previous year's defeat intensified the interpersonal discord within the crew. Despite being an international oarsman, McDaniel had stroked the 2006 Boat Race crew and the responsibility for having lost that race was disproportionally his, in the view of the Stern Four. West, in particular, had questioned his selection as stroke that year, and the two personalities continued to clash throughout the training period in 2007. Engelmann was pointedly given the stroke seat in 2007 in implicit recognition that West had been right about McDaniel. These two factors – the status inequality in the boat, accentuated by the heightened pressure to win – are fundamental to any explanation of the rhythm which Cambridge found on the Hammersmith Bend but also the difficulty they had in finding it.

The concept of rhythm

Rowing requires extraordinary levels of fitness and strength. Accordingly a large portion of CUBC's training was aimed at improving the fitness of the rowers. However, as rowers repeatedly emphasize, speed is a function of rhythm. It is very common in rowing that the crew with the most brute strength is not necessarily the fastest. Rhythm in rowing relies on a careful differentiation between the time in which the blade enters the water (the catch), the application of power to drive the boat forward, and the period of recovery, when the blade is removed from the water and the rowers move forward up the slide in preparation for the next stroke. This ascent up the slide should be exactly equivalent to the speed of the boat moving forward, so that rowers do not pull themselves back up the slide but allow the boat to 'float' up to them, its forward momentum allowing them to break their legs and draw themselves into the familiar crouched position ready for the catch (when the blade enters the waters).

It is relatively easy to generate good rhythm at low rating. The real skill of rowing lies precisely in generating rhythm at racing pace, when the rowers are applying maximum power at 35 to 40 (or more) strokes a minute. The speed of the stroke and the fatigue of the athletes impede the creation and maintenance of rhythm, especially under racing conditions, when anxiety and exhaustion may introduce technical mistakes that can easily destroy a rhythm. Moreover, at racing pace, crews are searching for tiny, but non-trivial, differentials

between stroke and recovery consisting of only hundredths of a second. These differentials are precisely the hardest to locate collectively in the heat of a race.

Rhythm may be innate to the individual but it does not, ironically, seem to come naturally to groups; it is a social achievement requiring a shared understanding of what participants are trying to achieve. Durkheim was explicit about the need for this common concept. The ritual required a totem; a collective reference point around which worshippers could dance. Similarly, in explaining sporting performance, sociologists have recognized the importance of shared concepts to inform training routines; Chambliss describes how elite swimmers focus on the ideal, legal stroke (Chambliss 1989: 73). Wacquant's ethnography of a South-Chicago boxing gym illustrates the centrality of a collective concept to the performance of sport. In Wacquant's study, the gym's manager, Dee Dee, oversaw this process of training and socialization. Wacquant describes his importance in supervizing the training, and how Dee Dee would periodically declaim from his office (Wacquant 2004: 103). Dee Dee's instructions were heeded not just by the boxer at whom they were directed, but acted upon by everyone present in the gym thinking that they too were the object of Dee Dee's reprimands. In this way, Dee Dee affirmed a collective ideal of pugilism around which all the members of the gym united. In his analysis of music-making, Alfred Schutz described how musicians had to agree on an imaginative ideal about how a composition should sound in order to be able to play together as a 'We' (Schutz 1964: 161).

In a team sport like crew rowing, this shared concept becomes vital given the extraordinary degree of synchronization required. Clearly, the concept of rhythm is not merely abstract. Just as participants generate social cohesion by a dialectical process of interaction (mutual action and reaction), so the concept of rhythm in a rowing crew emerges out of the rowing itself. Nevertheless, although always related to immediate practice, the best crews have – or develop – a clear and refined idea of the optimal stroke. Without this shared, and very precise, mental image of 'the perfect stroke', individuals might well be brilliant virtuoso rowers without ever fusing into a unified crew.

The best crews always identify an ideal stroke and, therefore implicitly, an optimal rhythm to which they aspire. A rhythm normally arises automatically as the crew practice this ideal stroke. In 2007, rhythm was not simply an aspect of the crew's concept of the stroke; it was prioritized as absolutely fundamental to their whole approach and to the success of the crew. Decisively, the lack of rhythm in the previous year's Boat Race had been identified as the critical factor in Cambridge's defeat in discussions at the beginning of the training programme in September. Significantly, from the very first, Kieran West (No.6) emphasized the importance of rhythm to previous year's defeat:

> With the people we had on board we should have been able to win the race [in 2006] by Hammersmith, been clear ahead of Oxford, and sheltered on the Surrey station before getting to the point where the weather on Middlesex became as critical as it did. This year we've got to get the crew to settle into a rhythm in a way we were never able to achieve last year. (Kieran West, 9 April 2008, email communication)

West's assessment was plausible and it was accepted in CUBC as correct.

However, it is important to recognize that this interpretation – made by one of the most dominant individuals in the crew – of why the crew had lost was deeply political, conveniently devolving responsibility from the senior members of the crew in 2006. There were several factors that might have played a role in Cambridge losing the 2006 Boat Race. The crew failed to install a pump and therefore took on too much water in the heavy sections of the race. More brutal assessments could have been made; the crew consisted of a number of international oarsmen, including West, but these rowers failed to gel in training or to produce the necessary power and determination on race day itself. Boat Race history is littered with examples when senior oarsmen with international experience, but perhaps used to racing over 2000 metres, fail to perform. In 2006, Cambridge's senior rowers – not rhythm – might have been held responsible for demonstrating a lack of leadership on race day. By pointing to rhythm, however, West was nominally sharing blame across the whole crew in an egalitarian way; they had all failed to co-ordinate themselves. However, implicit within this claim was a critique of the less talented and experienced crewmembers. They had vitiated the rhythm of the crew and, therefore, obstructed the senior internationals from exploiting their power and talent. The internationals could not row well because the rest of the crew had failed to provide them with a stable platform. Of course, McDaniel was the individual target of this critique; he had been the stroke but had failed to generate rhythm. There seems little doubt that West's identification of rhythm as *a* cause of defeat had some validity but its unquestioned acceptance as *the* only reason for the defeat was a political achievement which was really a reflection of the status of the internationals in the boat. Other sociologists have noted this kind of phenomenon. In his work on little league baseball, Gary Fine has identified the way in which political hierarchies operate in sports clubs. Closely echoing William Whyte Foote's celebrated analysis of how bowling affirmed the social hierarchy of the street-corner gang (Foote Whyte 1993: 21),[7] the actions of Fine's high status boys, who are good at baseball, popular or tough, are treated quite differently to those with little status; 'Those players who are defined as the very best will not be much criticized even when they make an error for which a poorer player would be condemned' (Fine 1987: 91). One of the most intriguing parts of his analysis of the internal dynamics of the teams is Fine's friendship network diagrams. Fine

depicts one of the best players, Justin Kray, at the very top of one of the hierarchies; he is all but immune from criticism. Fine's work usefully illustrates how political hierarchies in and around the sports teams determines the way the game is played typically to the advantage of favoured participants. In CUBC, the Stern Four enjoyed the position of Fine's popular boys. They exerted moral authority over the rest of the crew – and indeed the coaches. The prioritization of rhythm was then a political achievement reflecting the status hierarchy of the crew. Moreover, the differential between the capabilities of the Stern and Bow Fours and the interpersonal difficulties in the crew made it difficult to generate a rhythm which was acceptable to the crew's elite. However there were further difficulties.

The Mahon style

At CUBC, as a famous and well-established club, there was a clear and enduring concept of the ideal stroke and the rhythm which went with it. The crew were constrained in their search for rhythm. They needed to establish not just a rhythm but a more distinctive – and elusive – 'Cambridge rhythm'. Specifically, they and their coaches felt impelled to adhere to the distinct 'smooth and relaxed' technical style developed by the late Cambridge coach Harry Mahon (and thus also known as the Mahon style). This style involves a long powerful stroke and finish, leading to a distinctive gather as the hands sweep unhurriedly away from the stomach until the arms are outstretched at which point the rowers all swing forward together. When it worked, the Mahon style was an effective, relaxed and aesthetically pleasing stroke but it was very difficult to attain. In contrasting the Mahon style with that pursued by the Canadian national squad, McDaniel (No.2) explained:

> With the Cambridge style, we search for rhythm. In Canada, we make it happen. There is a huge difference. In Cambridge, it was about hand speed out of bow [i.e. away from the body], coming out in sync at an arbitrary and slow speed. In Canada, we force the hands away from the finish at top speed, thus eliminating guesswork about the speed of the recovery, and thus eliminating the guesswork about a large segment of 'rhythm'. It was elusive in Cambridge because of the arbitrariness of the hands out of bow, in my view. When you're bringing guys from all over the world, with different ideas about this, it is very difficult to find. The Cambridge style is about picking it up at the catch on the toes (the easier part, in my view), driving together (not that hard when everyone is strong), and getting the hands away at the same speed (gloriously hard) (Kip McDaniel, personal communication, 28 May 2009).

Because the Cambridge rhythm relied on all the oarsmen moving their hands away together at an unspecified speed for which they had to search (rather

than simply as quickly as possible, as the Canadian national crew do), CUBC set the task of finding a rhythm for itself very hard.

Given the difficulty of achieving the Mahon style, some explanation is required why this ideal – rather than a more simple style like the Canadian one – was adopted by the crew. With the dominance of the elite Stern Four – especially with their own emphasis on rhythm – it might have been possible and even expected that they would introduce a technique – like fast hand speeds – which would make rhythm easy to achieve. There seem to be two reasons that they were unable to do this. Firstly, although the Stern Four were all internationals, only two were from the same national squad (Schulte and Engelmann). Consequently, although the Stern Four recognized themselves as elite, no one had sufficient individual kudos to impose his personal style on the rest of the crew. For example, Engelmann and Schulte would stress the need for a quick but soft catch – which they felt had helped them win the World Rowing Championships earlier that year – but this was never more than a suggestion. West relied on his experience in winning Olympic gold in Sydney in making suggestions of his own. Yet, there was no consensus among these elite oarsmen about how to establish rhythm, even if their own national squads had instituted concrete techniques. They had to arrive at a new consensus.

At the same time, these internationals were now all rowing for Cambridge. Despite their evident status, the traditions of CUBC became relevant. Crew-members had to defer at least to some extent to the existing practices of CUBC if they wanted to row in the Boat Race. This was not a mere atavistic deference to tradition; it has a concrete social basis in the personnel of CUBC. Duncan Holland was the head coach but he drew a team of coaches throughout the season, many of whom had rowed for CUBC in the past. These coaches identified with the Mahon style which they had themselves practiced. Moreover, most members of the crew had been rowing for CUBC for a number of years and had already learnt this style; it was a squad-wide technique intended not just to maximize the performance of a Blue Boat in any particular year but to produce a pool of squad rowers, any of whom might be selected during their time at Cambridge to row for the crew. It was not easy to overturn this institutionalized technique. Moreover, in the absence of a clear idea about how to find rhythm among the internationals, it was easier to consent to existing Cambridge practices. Consequently, the Mahon style became an expedient means of uniting the crew. In place of strict instructions about hand speeds, Cambridge generated a rhythm by emphasizing a quick but subtle catch at the start of the stroke and a relaxed, synchronized swing forward of the bodies (after the hands had gone away) at its finish, as the Mahon technique specified.

The crew committed itself to a nebulous concept of rhythm. As a result, it was noticeable that coaches referred to oblique techniques to generate rhythm. The coaches and oarsmen would reiterate the importance of rhythm before, during and in de-briefs after outings, but without a definite technique

for attaining it. They talked about the need to breathe and to stay relaxed. For instance, in instructions emailed from Holland to his crew, he wrote: 'Breathe deep, feel the rhythm you want – picture going off the start. Do it'.[8] The act of breathing is central to rowing and can induce relaxation which is central to rhythm. Yet, it was neither a clear instruction about how to move together nor how to synchronize hand speeds. Indeed, the final abstract command – 'Do it' – summarized the lack of clarity about how the crew was supposed to generate a rhythm. If it were simply a matter of 'doing it', presumably the crew would have had little difficulty in having already done it. At one point so desperate did the coaches become, they encouraged the crew to read a well-known book about rowing, *Assault on Lake Casitas* (Lewis 1990). The aim was to inspire rhythm in the crew through positive mental attitude. It might have been rather more constructive for the coaches to identify a precise physical movement which could be uniformly imposed on the crew such as a set speed for pushing the hands away from the body at the end of the stroke.

In his work on martial arts, George Girton showed how kung fu fighters developed their skills through tiny, apparently trivial, adjustments to their physical repertoires. One fighter held his thumb incorrectly: 'I found out today that I had been doing certain movements wrong . . . I was holding my thumb wrong on my hand' (Girton 1986: 65). Merely by altering the position of the thumb, the fighter's entire sequence of moves became 'more integrated and felt more powerful and flowing'. He concluded: 'So the amazement is the large difference the way you hold your thumb can make in what you do' (Girton 1986: 66). In hours of training, CUBC coaches micro-analysed every detail of their oarsmen's stroke but, in generating a rhythm, a concrete technique like those used by the Canadian crew – or Girton's kung fu fighters – were not used. The crew had to guess at a rhythm. The concept of the Mahon style and the uneasy relations within the crew and between the crew and the coaches seem to have obstructed the use of such a definite physical reference point, easily identifiable by all. Having prioritized rhythm as the key to boat speed predominately for interpersonal political reasons, the crew had to grope for rhythm instead, struggling to find it, because the very same internal dynamics prevented them from identifying the micro-practices which might generate that flow. Given the status hierarchy within the crew, no one had authority to impose an alternative concept of rhythm or a technique for achieving the Mahon style.

Crew selection

In the light of this struggle to realize the Mahon style, itself due primarily to the complex power dynamics within CUBC, the crew was forced to more unusual and extreme measures in their search for rhythm. The crew, and especially its

senior members, began to question the process of selection itself, rejecting the line-up officially decided by the head-coach. They imposed themselves on the selection process to ensure that, ultimately, only those individuals whom they wanted were in the crew. As the crew's statements at the time and then later in confirmatory discussions demonstrated, the calls made by Dowbiggin, O'Shaughnessy and Engelmann in those four minutes around the Hammersmith Bend were critical in enjoining a sense of rhythm in the crew and ultimately in Cambridge's victory. Engelmann was always going to be in the crew. Yet, on established rowing criteria, the selection of O'Shaughnessy and Dowbiggin, the two individuals who also made crucial calls around the Hammersmith Bend, was very surprising; they should not have been in the crew. In order to appreciate why they were in the Blue Boat and, therefore, to understand how their calls prompted such a powerful collective reaction from the crew, it is necessary to consider this unconventional selection process for the 2007 Blue Boat. Interestingly, the same political dynamics which obstructed the crew's rhythm in the first place were very evident in the process of selection.

In most years, Blue Boat selection is an unforgiving but ordered process. The squad undergo a training programme that assesses individual performance from September to about January. From these tests, a ranking of oarsmen emerges on the basis of which coaches ordinarily select their top crew by mid-January. The Blue Boat (and the reserve boat, Goldie), then have three months to train for the Boat Race in April. In the lead up to the 2007 Boat Race, Cambridge's selection process became irregular. As they struggled to find rhythm, the Stern Four (Engelmann, Schulte, West and James) and Kip McDaniel (Bow) staged a rebellion against the imposed selection of the coaches in early January 2007 and again in March, with just ten days before the Boat Race. When, in January 2007, the coaches announced the Blue Boat crew, these five senior oarsmen objected. They strongly felt that O'Shaughnessy, a Canadian oarsman, should be given the Number Two Seat. The coaches' line-up included someone at Two who was technically correct and as powerful as any of the non-international rowers in the CUBC. Yet, on the evening of 3 January 2007, the Stern Four and McDaniel confronted their chief coach, telling him that he had underestimated the impact of O'Shaughnessy on the crew's rhythm and speed.[9] O'Shaughnessy had missed out on selection because he was seen as technically inferior to the coaches' preferred choice. Dismissing the selection data, they argued that O'Shaughnessy was somehow able to help them get a higher level of performance out of themselves.

In elite rowing, affection is rarely appealed to as a criterion for inclusion; oarsmen want to row in the fastest crew irrespective of whether they enjoy each other's company or not. Moreover, the grounds upon which O'Shaughnessy's inclusion was justified were unusual.[10] The senior members of the crew never disputed the technical data; he was technically inferior and

no stronger than the oarsman he would replace. However, they preferred rowing with him because he seemed better able to sense, and respond constructively to the mood of his colleagues on and off the water. By contrast, the oarsman originally selected for the Two Seat was felt to be socially awkward. Nicknamed 'space cadet' by fellow squad members, his inability to communicate effectively with the rest of the crew was seen as a liability. The senior oarsmen felt they needed a strong communicator, able to synchronize the weaker Bow Four with the stronger and more experienced Stern.

As evidence, the Stern Four point to the fact that O'Shaughnessy made calls during practice that seemed to have a positive impact on inducing coordination, focus and rhythm. What none of the crew knew at the time was that these calls often originated with McDaniel (sat directly behind O'Shaughnessy in Bow seat); McDaniel would tell O'Shaughnessy what calls to make when, knowing full well that if he were to make these calls himself they were likely to have had the opposite effect because of his tense relationship with Stern Four and to West, in particular. O'Shaughnessy would thus act as a conduit between McDaniel and the Stern Four, who would otherwise have either ignored, or reacted against McDaniel telling them what to do. O'Shaughnessy proved to be a unifying element within the boat, attuned to the delicate political hierarchy that existed within it, and able to mediate between the elite Stern Four and the Bow Four, and especially between McDaniel and West, without challenging anyone's status. It was a role the technically more gifted oarsman originally selected by the coaches could never have played.

The selection of the coxswain followed a similarly unconventional procedure. The designated coxswain, Russ Glenn, was de-selected in an unprecedented move only ten days before the Boat Race. The controversial decision to replace him with a far less experienced female coxswain, Rebecca Dowbiggin, was directly related to the problem of finding a sustainable rhythm. The cox steers the boat but also provides instructions to the crew. The latter is a critical but much ignored role. Given a very limited ability for oarsman to communicate with each other, and no visual cues other than the back, neck and head of the person directly in front, the coxswain's calls become decisive. Indeed, the mere tone of the coxswain's instructions can sometimes be more important than the actual words used, particularly as, under the intense stress of racing, rowers become an-aerobic, losing full hearing and vision. Thus, oarsmen respond to the disembodied instructions of the coxswain, whom only Stroke can see. Good coxes establish a repertoire of instructions that carry a dense and emotive significance for all the crew.

Glenn, who had originally been selected in January, was felt to be too aggressive not just in his steering but in his instructions. This aggression had been evident already early on in training but, at that stage, no contender had been in sight. Thus as early as October, he had been blamed for the poor performance at the Head of the Charles River (Boston's equivalent to the

Thames Head of the River Race) by coaches and crew and he himself had accepted some culpability:

> When I called to take the rating up and move for 15, I was trying to implement the standard 'two-man move' that Cambridge has used since I've been here the last two years. In retrospect it was a bad call – we hadn't practiced that kind of attack, and it would have been better to keep the focus more simply on the second half rhythm. (Russ Glenn, email to the crew, 23 October 2006)

His aggressiveness had not diminished during the course of the training programme, and this tendency towards the over-dramatic caused the crew to tense up, undermining their efforts at finding a sustainable rhythm.

Up until ten days before the race, Rebecca Dowbiggin had not been considered a serious Blue Boat coxswain candidate on grounds of her inexperience. It was then that the crew's unhappiness with Glenn reached a climax. At an extraordinary crew meeting, the senior members of the crew came to a decision:

> Kip spoke very strongly and said he hated Russ's calls in training and racing and only put up with him because he thought everyone else liked him; Dan said he spent time after each outing having to calm Kip down from wanting to punch Russ because of these calls; Seb and I said we hated his race calls and we'd repeatedly told him since trial eights to be less aggressive and have a more calm, relaxed coxing style, but he hadn't listened or improved despite all the input; Thorsten, Jake and Pete agreed they didn't like his calls but hadn't said anything because they each thought everybody else liked Russ so didn't want to cause dissent in the crew. Thorsten said he thought Rebecca had been really good in trial eights; we all agreed that we didn't know much about her steering, but we felt Russ had to go because his calls were so appallingly bad and he hadn't made any changes in spite of repeated general input from the crew as well as being specifically told not to make such aggressive calls. (Kieran West, personal communication, 15 October 2007).

Throughout the year, there had been tensions between West and McDaniel, over last year's race and their mutual status. Yet, in this meeting, Kip McDaniel and the Stern Four were in total agreement. Decisively, they all rejected Russ – and indeed quite vehemently. Rebecca's, rather than Russ's, calls were unanimously interpreted as helping to induce rhythm.

By sacking Glenn, West and McDaniel finally came to a political accord, submerging their grievances over the previous year; the Stern and Bow Four were finally united. At the same time, while Glenn became a potentially convenient scapegoat, Dowbiggin and O'Shaughnessy appear to have become collective representatives for the crew, signifying its new-found unity. The

ability of their calls to induce rhythm may not have been only or even primarily due to the fact that they were objectively superior but seems to have substantially been due to the fact that instead of having individuals imposed on them, the senior members of the crew had appointed Dowbiggin and O'Shaughnessy. They had consciously invested these individuals – and their calls – with communal importance. Following a Levi-Straussian reading of Durkheim, Alexander and Smith's 'strong programme' in cultural sociology has sought to show how established symbols, often demonstrating a binary structure, have a determinate effect over social life (Alexander 2003: 8; Alexander and Smith 2003: 11–13). For them, collective representations come to have a quasi-objective status. After their selection, Dowbiggin and O'Shaughnessy might be interpreted as symbols of this kind. Certainly, the neo-Durkheimianism of Alexander and Smith represents an important and creative research programme. However, in the case of Dowbiggin's and O'Shaughnessy's race calls, it may easier to argue not that these individuals attained an objective symbolic status over the crew. Rather, on Race Day, the calls of O'Shaughnessy, Dowbiggin were able to generate such a powerful response because they were the conscious expression of an interpersonal accord between the crew members rather than an institutionalized symbol imposed on them.

Indeed, their very role as collective representations of this consensus seemed to have been possible in so far as Dowbiggin and O'Shaughnessy continued to defer to other members of the crew and to recognize their place in the hierarchy. They were sufficiently junior to present no threat to the status of the Stern Four on whom they remained dependent for their selection. Indeed, O'Shaughnessy and Dowbiggin made a self-conscious attempt to play this mediating role. They actively sought to engender crew cohesion especially through their careful use of language and tone in a way Katz has observed in his work on emotions (Katz 1999: 264). Recognizing the contentious situation in which he had been selected, O'Shaughnessy used his voice to relax the crew. He was cognizant of his role of communicator and co-ordinator in the crew:

> I also really worked on the way I said things. Whenever I used an 'angry' voice it slowed us down. I tried to go as deep down in my diaphragm as possible to get the deepest and calmest voice I could muster. Using my diaphragm also helped with the rhythm of my own breathing – I could do it by using the air I was using to breathe with and not miss a breath. I also thought it would carry better if I made it deep and loud (Dan O'Shaughnessy, personal communication, 27 May 2009)

On the Surrey Bend, he deliberately implemented this technique with his 'Shape, Range, Drive' call. O'Shaughnessy sought to focus the crew on their ideal stroke, and his tone, imitated the state of relaxed concentration required to achieve it. Similarly, Dowbiggin was also careful about the kinds of calls she

made. Upon her selection, she introduced a number of calls (already developed by her in training with the reserve crew) aimed at inducing relaxation. She developed the term 'good boys' to this end whose two long syllables and reassuring meaning engendered precisely the relaxation which the crew sought; the crew identified the call as one which it actively liked. Indeed, the word 'rhythm' was one of the most common commands she used throughout the race. Her approach contrasted with Glenn's monotonous calls for power and aggression and in the decisive phase of the race from the fourth to the tenth minutes, she recurrently used these calls to engender rhythm, not power. Rarely did Dowbiggin and O'Shaughnessy focus on precise micro-techniques of rowing in their calls[11] – none had been definitely identified in training – but rather on general, emotive phrases which emphasized relaxation and which were intended to communicate the sense of flow which was central to the Mahon style. Above all, in communicating a general mood of confidence and contentment to the crew, Dowbiggin and O'Shaughnessy reminded the crew of its new-found collective sense of unity, allowing them to relax as an eight, knowing that each was now reconciled with all the other members of the crew.

The results of their interventions were important. Inducing a sense of calm, these commands allowed Engelmann to make his 'Yoohoo' call, perhaps the most decisive moment in the race. Not only did this euphorically confirm that the crew had indeed found its rhythm but, uttered by one of the highest status members of the crew in the most important seat, it was a categorical statement of collective unity. The calls of O'Shaughnessy and Dowbiggin and Engelmann's emotive cry finally allowed the crew to relax and, therefore, to generate a rhythm which they had been struggling to find for seven months. These calls made an extraordinary collective sporting performance possible.

Conclusion

The difficult and painful search for rhythm by the Blue Boat in 2007 provides a potentially useful sociological example of the difficulty of ensemble productions. Collective performances require the discovery of a shared rhythm which allow participants to coordinate their actions. Yet, at any moment, the possibilities for conflict, disagreement or individual error are multiple. Indeed, it seems that the more complex the collective task, the more difficult it is to attain the necessary level of mental and physical unity required to achieve it. However, some enduring features appear from this study about how to generate rhythm and to realize the possibility of collective performance. The 2007 Boat Race reveals the indispensability of a shared concept to which all participants assent; collaborators in any collective task have to generate a common idea of what it is they are trying to achieve and how they are going to coordinate their actions to do it. Yet, a mere concept is not enough. For

successful collective performance, the participants must also develop an often unseen, subterranean repertoire of concrete micro-techniques and practices which harmonize individual actions. These micro-techniques have to be cued and affirmed recurrently before and during the performance itself, if discord and fragmentation is to be avoided. The Blue Boat struggled to find a rhythm in 2007 precisely because the curious political dynamics of CUBC in that year impeded the identification of concrete micro-techniques, which would have united the crew.

One of the questions which still requires an answer is why did it take so long for the Blue Boat to row properly during the race? It was a far better and bigger crew than Oxford and, ultimately, with the good conditions of the day, the race should never have been in doubt. As the captain of a college rowing club noted: 'it was hard to avoid the conclusion that the crew, while winning, had significantly underperformed'.[12] Oxford should never have got in front, especially since they were disadvantaged by the first bend around Fulham Football Club. The explanation of the relative underperformance of the Cambridge crew, of course, lies partly with Oxford. Knowing how powerful a crew they were facing, Oxford went off very hard at the start, rowing extremely aggressively and very well. Cambridge were surprised by Oxford's speed and seem, perhaps as Oxford planned, to have been hussled into a tense and rushed rhythm as a result of this pressure. Yet, however well Oxford rowed in the open stages of the race, Cambridge's under-performance seems primarily to lie in internal crew politics. The crew were simply unable to unite itself until the very last moment: seven days before the race. On the Saturday before the Boat Race, the crew raced the Head of the River Race[13] across the same course in reverse. To enter a major event like the Head only seven days before the Boat Race is to go against all training norms; it is an exhausting event which threatens to tire a crew before their Race and a poor showing might have destroyed what little confidence the crew had. Yet the strategy worked. As West recalls:

> In the Eights Head[13] we finally found the rhythm we'd been looking for, and this gave us the confidence to go back to the way we'd rowed that day, knowing it was quick enough to beat everyone in the country, so confident it would be too quick for Oxford (Kieran West, 9 April 2009, email communication)

In the event, and despite the risk, this performance acted as a concrete reference point so that when O'Shaughnessy, Dowbiggin and Engelmann made their calls, all the oarsman had a clear idea of what they were trying to achieve as well as the confidence to believe that they could attain this rhythm. Yet, normally, the Blue Boat would row together uninterruptedly from mid-January. Consequently, although highly trained as a squad, the Blue Boat with its completely untested cox and relatively new No.2 were practically a scratch crew and the race itself was more an experimental outing than the planned culmination of a seven

month training programme. It seems plausible to suggest that had the crew resolved its internal difficulties before Christmas and identified appropriate rhythmic micro-practices then, the Boat Race would have been a foregone conclusion. The tribulations of the Cambridge crew in 2007 demonstrate the importance of rhythm to successful ensemble performance but they also illustrate the great difficulty of coordinating complex social practices.

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Notes

1. The authors are jointly grateful to three anonymous referees, Randall Collins, Phil Smith, Jeffrey Alexander, Mattius Varul and the Manchester Ethnography Group for their helpful comments on earlier drafts of this article.

2. See also Bellah (2005).

3. This article is based on an ethnographic study of Cambridge University Boat Club's (CUBC) 2007 Boat Race preparations, from their first day of training on 19 September 2006 to the actual Boat Race on 7 April 2007; one of the authors lived as a member of CUBC throughout this period with unparalleled access to the training process (de Rond 2009). As a result of these close connections, the authors were able to corroborate their data with the Cambridge crew as the research developed, in order to ensure that their interpretations accorded with the understandings of the athletes themselves.

4. The rower sitting in the second seat in the boat from the bow (see Figure I).

5. CUBC race recording.

6. As is often the case with intense social events, there is a small discrepancy here between O'Shaughnessy and Cornelius. According to Cornelius, O'Shaughnessy called after Engelmann while O'Shaughnessy reported that he called first. There is no definitive way of confirming which is correct; O'Shaughnessy's calls were not picked up by the microphone. We have presumed that O'Shaughnessy is likely to have a better memory of when he made his calls. Ultimately, the discrepancy is a small one since Cornelius confirms the importance of O'Shaughnessy's calls, only recalling their occurrence differently.

7. Although the leader of the gang, Doc, did not himself need always to win the competition, it was essential that the competition was dominated at least by his lieutenants, Danny and Long John. Social inferiors like Alex or Joe Dodge were prevented from winning through the application of various forms of social pressure.

8. Fieldnotes, 8 February 2007.

9. Fieldnotes, 3 January 2007.

10. Instructively, O'Shaughnessy was not subsequently selected for 2008, despite being the only returning member of the victorious 2007 crew, in an Olympic year where the level of internal competition is lower.

11. In the ninth minute of the race, Dowbiggin used the phrase 'di-rect' a number of times. This call drew the crew's attention to the catch, communicating the need for a quick but smooth insertion of the blade into the water. It was a call she had developed in training (Rebecca Dowbiggin, personal communication, 15 April 2009). It was one of the only specifically technical calls she made in the race but was notably absent from her repertoire in the crucial fifth minute of the race. Then, her calls were purely for rhythm and relaxation.

12. http://www.amazon.co.uk/Last-Amateurs-Hell-Back-Cambridge/dp/1848310455/ref=sr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1284128196&sr=1-1

13. Formally called the Head of the River Race, it is a race that traditionally takes place one week before the Boat Race.

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