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Translation, Necessity, Vulnerability: An Interview with Michael Cronin

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Translation, Necessity, Vulnerability: An Interview with Michael Cronin *

by
Dionysios Kapsaskis

Dionysios Kapsaskis: In your books, *Translation and Globalisation* and *Translation and Identity*, you discuss these two basic terms, ‘translation’ and ‘globalisation,’ using the same concepts, for instance nomadism, hybridity and the symbiosis with technology.¹ I wonder if we can speak of translation as a paradigmatic term for the era of globalisation.

Michael Cronin: One of the things that struck me about globalisation when I began to look at it more closely —and the term comes into vogue very much in the 1980s— was this extraordinary omission. It seemed to me that when we talked about globalisation, we were talking about the globe, the planet. One of the most striking features about the globe and the planet is linguistic diversity. Approximately 6,000 languages are spoken on the globe and the vast majority of inhabitants speak small subsections of those languages, but the fact is that linguistic plurality is a daily fact of human existence on this planet and that nothing, but nothing, can happen —global media can’t happen, global trade can’t happen, global finance can’t happen and global literature, if you want to talk about this, can’t happen— unless there is somebody who is ‘bridging the language gap,’ mediating between the different language groups on the planet. And it is always odd that people are talking about global climate change, global transport systems, global economic systems and global media, but nowhere in the literature could you find any reference to language and the inevitable fact of translation. So, I suppose, that was the first thing I was picking up on, this kind of extraordinary kind of elision of the fact of language and translation. And then, the second dimension to this was, how would we think about globalisation differently then, if we factor in the fact of language? In particular, how do we think about the relationship between global forces and local realities? So, it was the notion of the translator as a kind of mediator or agent at that particular interface between global reality and local sites and local situations.

D.K.: In your discussion of Irish history in the seventeenth and eighteenth century, as well as in your reading of Shakespeare, you have shown how the project of translation and interpreting, at the time, was really part of the project of colonisation. My question is, does the centrality of translation today, in terms of both the amount of translation that is taking place and the development of Translation Studies as a discipline, intimate that there may be a link between globalisation as a phenomenon and translation as a very central notion to it? To put it in a different way: do you think there is a historical break that is brought about by globalisation and can perhaps be symbolised by translation as a notion in the centre of it? Or perhaps this would be taking it too far?

M.C.: No, I think there is a very important shift which is taking place, which is perhaps best captured by a term that the British cultural critic Stuart Hall uses, the notion of “vernacular cosmopolitanism.”² Whereas before, we tended to think of cosmopolitanism as something that was engaged in by social elites in the developed world, where people went to different countries, learned elite languages like French, English, German, Spanish and Portuguese, in certain circumstances, and that they then partook of this global cosmopolitan culture for a very small elite, vernacular cosmopolitanism, as Stuart Hall describes it, is that a culture that is distant, that is far, you no longer have to travel great distances to encounter it. It is living next door, it is in the corner shop, it is in your local pub. So one of the effects of time-space compression in the contemporary global world is that radical forms of otherness —to translate that into very different linguistic realities— are now living side by side, cheek by jowl, and that this means then that the notion of what I call the ‘translation imperative’ becomes all the stronger. You now no longer have people of cognate languages living side by side, but people of radically different non-cognate languages. So that this sense of proximity generates the translation imperative and generates, of course, great anxieties as to the question of language and translation, which seem to be based around multiculturalism in contemporary Europe.

D.K.: I think you have proposed the idea of micro-cosmopolitanism, which could be thought of as a conceptual tool for researching these situations, this new sort of vernacular cosmopolitanism.³

M.C.: Yes, the example I often give is of a travel book by the French writer François Maspero, where he takes the train in Paris Airport, Charles de Gaulle⁴ Normally you take this train, it takes about 40 minutes to get into Paris city centre, to Gare du Nord. He arrives in Paris three months later. What happens, of course, is that at each of the stops of this train journey he gets off and he spends time with people in the area, he listens to their stories, they dialogue with him. What emerges as he goes through that landscape in the suburbs of Paris between the airport and the city centre, is this extraordinary linguistic and cultural complexity: dozens and dozens of languages, dozens and dozens of cultures, which are packed into that 40-minute express ride to this part of Paris. We can transpose this model to the bus ride from Dublin Airport to the city centre or we could do it with the Heathrow Express in London. As he begins to slow down, as he begins to narrow in on specific places, what emerges is a world not of increasing simplicity but of growing complexity. What I wanted to try to get out with the micro-cosmopolitanism idea is that there is a certain sense in literature and certainly in accounts of modernism in particular, that you find new, complex, linguistically differentiated and culturally diverse experiences in the large metropolises. So, it is Paris of the 1930s, it is London of the 1890s, it is New York of the 1950s, and the role of other places was that they were ethnic warehouses, where people lived simple, ethnically uncomplicated lives. They were then taken to the metropolitan centre and they were shook about with all these other people from the ethnic warehouses, and then they became complex and culturally diverse and linguistically there as human beings. Whereas in fact, if you look at a great deal of human history, it is the other way around. Small villages in the north of England, medium-sized towns in the west of Scotland, small cities in central or northern Italy and in western Greece —when you begin to look into them in great detail, what you'll find are these extraordinary histories of linguistic and cultural complexity that are embedded within those places. So to some extent, this notion of micro-cosmopolitanism is not to set up this polarity between the simple, uncomplicated local and then the complex, diverse, macro or global metropolitan, but rather to suggest that those polarities actually don't make sense, that the complexity lies within detail.

D.K.: In a sense therefore, this opposition, these polarities are made up: they are perhaps constructed, they are just interpretative schemes.

M.C.: Well, I think that they were thought of for very good reasons and I think one is imperial and the other is national. In terms of nations that went on to become empire, the notion of constructing the capital that was the heart of the metropolis, whether it be London, Paris, Madrid or Lisbon, was part of trying to make, if you like, the empire cohere. That it would have to have a kind of centre. The centre had to be at higher level, more complex. So, in the case of the nation states that begin to emerge in the nineteenth century, the Czechs, the Finns, the Irish and so on mirror the imperial project that wants to create a certain sense of national cohesion —the imagined communities that Benedict Anderson talks about.⁵ What they were doing then was to create a sense of the capital that is being the distillation, the quintessential expression of the complexity of that particular nation state. So, you find that those kinds of centralising projects have both an imperial and a national dimension.

D.K.: Absolutely. I would like to pick up on the ideas of the rural and the urban, but also the idea of identity as far as individual people and various forms of collectivities are concerned —an identity, that might be national or sexual, linguistic or cultural. I'd like to discuss this in terms of the concept of authenticity— a concept which has been deconstructed and made perhaps devoid of meaning, but nonetheless one that remains meaningful for many. I'm thinking that nations claiming their nationhood still today value the notion of authenticity. I am also thinking of the connection that may exist between the rural and the authentic, as opposed to the urban, which is supposed to be, if not degenerate, then complex at least. I would like to link that to the idea of translation, because translation is part of the nationalistic or the national project and it is also part of self-translation, how people change identities or claim identities through translation. So is there a conflict between these

two ideas: authenticity and translation? Can we visit one idea with the help of the other? Or do you think perhaps authenticity is a term that is not viable anymore?

M.C.: I think that, to some extent, authenticity as tradition tends to get very bad press and it has very much been a target of what you might call the hermeneutics of suspicion. What you tend to get in the English-speaking world is Eric Hobsbawm's citing the Scots and their kilts, claiming, really the kilts were an eighteenth-century invention and are largely a fictional attribute of the wealthy class in Scotland; and if one looks at the historical records, the Scots wore more what is called a *fallaing* in Gaelic, a sort of cloak rather than a skirt, and a *léine*, a long shirt.⁶ But I think, to some extent, those kinds of criticisms of authenticity and tradition tend to miss the point. One of the things that characterise tradition is that it is something that is endlessly changing, so that how people make sense of their lives and these traditions changes through time. Say, for example, if people find that they begin to lose interest in one set of gods and move on to another, this can be either enforced or willing. Let's say the shift of the Roman world from pagan belief to Christianity. One thing that tends to characterise that shift from the classical pantheon to the Christian world is that the classical pantheon had lots of different gods and people adored these different gods. So Christianity was stuck with a problem: all it could offer people was one god. In all of these kinds of traditional practices, there were rites and beliefs that people had invested in. So what did you do? A stroke of genius for the Christian church was to come up with the notion of saint. So the notion of sainthood became the response of the Christian church to the notion of polytheism. People then could continue their ritual practices around holy wells and sacred sites and so on, but rather than giving them the names of separate Greek and later Roman divinities, you gave them the name of different Christian saints. So, it was a kind of a change and a transition. It was that, but it was also a continuity. So, tradition is something that is always changing and what strikes me about the notion of authenticity is that it is something that is constantly changing. In other words, how people represent themselves to themselves evolves or changes through time.

One of the things that best captures that, it seems to me, is the practice of translation itself. Translation acknowledges the necessity for people to attribute meaning to their lives. Because, if you can't make some sense of the life that you are living, the place in which you live and the community in which you find yourself, you will experience disorientation, loss, depression, anomie, a whole series of clinical symptoms. People do try to make a sense of their lives. We do it in domestic ways: we try to make sense of our children growing up or our relationship with our partners. And we do that in the wider community: we try to make sense of how we should act in our workplace, how we should act with other citizens, the community and so on. So we have to make sense of our lives. I think, to some extent, it is that sense-making that I would describe as authenticity. It is the attempt to try and attribute meaning to something. And this is where translation comes into the picture. Because what translation shows us is that the process of meaning-making is negotiated, it is processual and it is endlessly changing.

If I give an example, it is going back a few centuries to the late medieval period. A very first translation of the *Aeneid* was into Irish Gaelic, *Imtheachta Æniasa*. If you read the Irish Gaelic translation, you get a number of passages which are devoted to this beautiful description of Aeneas's dog. He has lovely ears and a very fine coat, his paws are magnificent, he is very well groomed, he has these amazing ears and if you look inside his ears you see these lovely pink curls. So there is this ecstatic description of Aeneas's dog. If you look at any of the Latin texts that we have, there is absolutely no trace of a dog anywhere in the *Aeneid*. So why does this dog turn up in this translation? Well, it turns up in the translation because the kind of people who would be listening to that translation being read out are going to be the people in the upper echelons of society in the Gaelic and the hibernicised Anglo-Norman elite. And a sign of prestige was having a big dog. The bigger the dog, the better groomed the dog was —this was a kind of status symbol in the society. So the idea that you could have somebody who is powerful and heroic, with this kind of status, without a dog is inconceivable. So what

that translation does is, it is authentic to the meaning-making desires of that community, whereas you might see it as inauthentic in a philological or brute empirical way. It seems to me that why translation is so important to us is that it shows us how experiences of authenticity are most authentic when they are inauthentic. It is that moment when one is least faithful to the source that you realise just how authentic this act of translation is, because people are very keen on trying to make this correspond to their own search for meaning.

D.K.: Which relates to the idea of hybridity that you also analyse —hybridity implying also impurity and inauthenticity. In a very interesting passage in *Translation and Globalisation*, you discuss — negatively, I think— the idea, or the contention, that the limits of humanity are the limits of translation and that the limits of translation are the limits of humanity. However, can we say that it is precisely this quality of translation to point to the interface between authenticity and inauthenticity, or its quality to question these concepts, that makes translation a very human activity? Perhaps a more human activity than epistemologically more solid activities, for instance sciences?

M.C.: To follow on from this and answer the previous question, it seems to me that translation is central to human experience. In this current book I'm working on, I am trying to look at the origins of translation in different communities and how it emerges with urban civilisations, what I call the 3T vision. What I mean by the 3T vision is Trade, Technology and Translation. To some extent, the emergence of the human can only be understood in terms of our interface with the non-human. One of the points that Timothy Taylor, the paleoarchaeologist, makes is that we shouldn't really exist as a species because our head is far too big, our backs are far too weak, we have very poor insulation, for the first nine months of our lives we are incapable of feeding ourselves, the first five years of our lives we are incapable of clothing ourselves and we've poor eyesight compared with the most of our peers in the animal kingdom.⁷ We are very poor in the sense of hearing, taste and so on. But what creates the crucial shift for humanity is our ability to manipulate tools, because with tools we can cook, therefore we can enhance the protein value of the foods that we have, which we need to feed our brain, which quadruples in size, and with high-protein foods we went into an erect position. The length of our gut shrank by two thirds: you need a very long gut to digest most of the root foods and vegetables, and as we have a much shorter gut, we are very dependent particularly on cooked meat of various kinds. To put it very briefly, the actual survival or the viability of humanity is dependent on the ability to manipulate tools. If you like, the boundary between the human and the non-human: we are consubstantially shaped and moulded by the tools that we use. Without material tool worlds we simply would not exist.

How does that then work itself out in terms of the emergence of civilisation? One of the ways it works itself out is that we have to get access to bigger and better tools as we begin to multiply in numbers, which means we have to then have interactions with other groups of people, so we get trade. As a result of trade we also get translation. Then translation itself happens because we have particular tools: papyrus, styli, clay tablets, printed paper, computer terminals and so on. What all of this means, then, is that the notion of what it is to translate and what translation involves is the constant search for two things. One is sustainability of a particular kind of human community. The other is cohesion, that the actual group can sustain themselves as a sort of speech community, but a speech community that has gone into phase with other speech communities. There is a Lithuanian dramatist, Albertas Vidziunas, who uses a beautiful metaphor. We talk about the Tower of Babel; he talks about the Tower of Bubbles. He talks about people living within their language or their community and they are living within this bubble. You live within the bubble, but in order to survive physically, economically and so on, you must meet the other bubble. The problem, of course, is that the bubbles can burst. There is this fragility about cultures. So, the moment of translation is a moment of absolute necessity. But it is a moment of maximum vulnerability as well. Because this is where power comes into the picture. Some bubbles are bigger than others and they can engulf you, you can get subsumed into the larger

bubbles. So the Tower of Babel is like a Tower of Bubbles, both expanding, vulnerable. It captures nicely that sense of absolute necessity and absolute vulnerability.

D.K.: Which is a fantastic idea and a nice pun as well. As someone who studies translation and the history of translation, how do you justify —back in history but also today that translation has such a central role to play and is such a meaningful concept by itself— what we call the ‘nvisibility’ of translators, the ‘inaudibility,’ as you have said, of interpreters, and also the non-visibility of translation as a discipline?

M.C.: I suppose there are two things about that. One is that I don’t think that translation really is as invisible as is often made out to be. One reason I wrote that book, *Translation Goes to the Movies*, is that I wanted to show how in a mainstream Hollywood movie —everything from the Marx Brothers to *Star Wars*— questions of language difference and translation were absolutely central.⁸ There is this famous moment in the Marx Brothers’ film *A Night at the Opera*, where they are smuggling an opera singer to the United States. It is a scene in the lower deck —they replay this scene in *Titanic*, the 2001 film— and what happens is, the singer comes out, they are all dancing on the lower deck, and the song that he sings is “Cosi-Cosa.” He says in the song that the expression sometimes means ‘yes,’ sometimes it means ‘no,’ it means ‘yes,’ it means ‘no.’ So here they are, these migrants, they are going from the Old World to the New, they are going from all these different languages in the Old World to the English of the New World. But in the song, there are phrases you simply cannot translate. They are untranslatable. They mean one thing but they also mean the other. The dancing that is going on is a mixture of polkas and French cancan. It is mixed up together, so they are creating this kind of hybrid dance on the deck, which will then feed into the dance routines of Hollywood musicals. There is this kind of transition moment which is absolutely central to the film. There are many other examples. So, I think, on the one hand there is a greater visibility than is often acknowledged.

On the other, you are absolutely right to say that it is still a puzzle why it shouldn’t be more crucial in cultural debates and arguments. One of the arguments that I make in the *Globalisation* book, and then I amplify in the *Identity* book, is this contention that Régis Debray makes in his work on mediology, which is that there is a kind of taboo in societies about media.⁹ Debray says, the most extraordinary thing about the contemporary city is not the opera house, the national theatre, the great parks or monuments. It is the sewage system. The sewage system is this remarkable thing. It is an engineering feat, it is fantastically complicated, it is enormously complex and if this sewage system breaks down, the city would descend into a state of utter chaos, decay and anarchy within a matter of days. We saw with hurricane Katrina what happened to the city of New Orleans. So, those networks that allow people to circulate: the electricity system, telecommunications, the sewage systems, those media networks, if you like, people don’t want to know about them. People don’t really want to know how their iPhone or Mac work. What they want is for the thing to work. So I think that to some extent translation partakes of that taboo about media, the mediated nature of our existence, the fact that we are fantastically dependent on these material networks, what Timothy Taylor calls the “third system”: we have the biological system, the first system; the second system is the chemical system; and the third, then, is the material, our tools.¹⁰ There is an inherent taboo against these things, which means that people prefer to ignore translation.

There is this wonderful story that is told about Reagan and Gorbachev. They had that famous encounter in Camp David. Reagan jumps on the golf cart and Gorbachev gets on as well and then Gorbachev’s interpreter heads for the golf cart. Of course, he gets about two inches and a whole load of CIA goons jump up on top of him and have him flat on the ground. Meanwhile, the golf cart takes off and after about ten yards it comes to a halt and Reagan roars back: ‘Where’s the bloody interpreter, for God’s sake?’ But the interpreter is down on the ground pinned. They simply couldn’t work without him. That anecdote demonstrates just how dependent so much communication is on the acts of translation, but they wish to keep it invisible.

D.K.: Which relates both to the idea of Michel Serres about translators being the angels that bring the message, because angels are immaterial and invisible, and to the other idea that you have used, the idea of weak ties.¹¹ There are weak ties in the network which are necessary and it is necessary that they remain weak in order for the system to operate better.

M.C.: Yes, it is a very important notion developed by a sociologist, Granovetter, who came up with the idea in a fairly simple but counter-intuitive way. Granovetter asked the question, how did most people get their first job? The received wisdom, when he asked a lot of people, was: 'I am sure people get their first job because their father or their mother got them in or they had a very good friend who said, 'Hey, would you like to...?' And this is how they got their first job. Granovetter then carried out the study and realised that, in fact, most people heard about a job from someone they didn't really know all that well. Not one of their close friends, but one of their loose acquaintances. When he further investigated this, he argued that it stands to reason, because you and your close friends share a similar body of knowledge, you have access to pretty much the same kind of knowledge in your social grouping; whereas the people who are on the edges of your group have access to different networks, different bodies and different stores of knowledge. So therefore, it is those weak ties in the community who are the most important sources of fresh thinking, new information and so on. Hence the importance of migration for so many societies. If you look at the history of the Nazi Germany, so many of the weak ties in German society, where the Jewish scholars and intellectuals and so on were both inside and outside of the society, were removed. And once those weak ties were removed, German mathematics collapses, German humanities goes into a nosedive. So that the actual intellectual and indeed the economic fortunes of Germany just go into free fall, because you end up with this kind of *völkisch* community with no weak ties and therefore no connections to new sources of information and so on.

D.K.: Whereas translators are really the people who are placed in such positions in the network?

M.C.: Yes, and because they do have this peripheral status, they are kind of marginal, on the outskirts of things, and they are crucial. According to another area of mathematical network theory, "small world theory", if you have a certain number of nodes which are connected to each other and then you just connect up two or three of these nodes, you can often set up a link to nodes that are very far away. We get that as well in this notion that everybody is apparently related to Margaret Thatcher. A very depressing thought, but nonetheless... All you need is a very small number of people to have distant links in order for all of the society to potentially have access to those distant links. I think translators typically play that role.

D.K.: At least within the academia, translation has found recognition. In terms of translators as professionals, personally I think that they do suffer from invisibility which reflects on their income and professional role. I think you have been arguing very persuasively about the political initiatives that have to be taken at national level, especially when it comes to minority cultures and languages, but also at international level, within institutions such as the European Union. You have been arguing for the strengthening of translation and Translation Studies, national literatures and also Comparative Literature. I think your argument is pretty clear. But my question is, how do you think this can happen in the current economic juncture, where politics as such is losing its decisive role in making important decisions for how things are run in a country or internationally, and where power is passing from politics to the banking system or the financial system? What do you think the future is for Translation Studies and for national or minority literatures?

M.C.: Well you just asked me a very large question - it is about life, the universe and everything. Let me try to answer your question in two parts. Firstly, I think what is absolutely crucial, just to talk about the European project for the moment, is the return of political economy. I think what has happened is that Europe has become subordinated to a version of the economy which is that of

financial capitalism, where what counts is the viability of that financial system, irrespective of the consequences for the citizens of Europe. What we mean by re-introducing political economy is making sure that the economy becomes subordinate to the political needs of European citizens. There are many ways that you can do this. To take one very small example, I think that financial products and services should be treated in exactly the same way as new drugs are treated. You have to measure the toxicity, the likely effects they are going to have on human beings, their lives and so on. Wouldn't it be perfectly possible to have, along with a food and drug administration, a finance-as-drug administration that would actually test the toxicity of financial services and products, what they would do in terms of undermining the real economy of wages, jobs and so on? So that is a regulatory framework that will be driven by a new version of political economy.

How does this relate to translation? Well, Jacques Delors once said, "you cannot fall in love with a common market." There is no way you can create any sense of a European project, of European purpose, if it is simply driven by economic instrumentalism - I mean, economic instrumentalism that is subordinate to the financial services sector. However, if you re-invent a political economy, an economy that comes subordinate to the political needs of the citizens of different countries, another dimension to that would be, what is going to be the element of cohesiveness? And the element of cohesiveness, it seems to me, is going to be this interaction or exchange between citizens and peoples of Europe. The only one way in which they can do that is through translation. Having access to the books they are reading, the programmes they are watching, the music they are listening to, and so on. Because the less we do that, all we have is a co-existence of 27 solitudes. Worse than that, the only thing that will unite us is a kind of predatory financial services sector that is devastating different societies and it is creating untold damage here in England. The same is happening in Ireland, in Greece - it is working its way across Europe. There is more money in Europe than there has ever been in Europe's history. The problem is that the amount of money that is in wages and salaries has reached an all-time low. And it is getting smaller. Whereas the money that is in shares and capital keeps increasing all the time. So we are ending up with the worst kind of unity and that's why it is leading to so much unhappiness on the ground.

D.K.: Do you think that such an initiative might start from the smaller countries? Do you see any hope for larger countries like the UK or France to start projects that might promote translation, minority literature, modern languages at the university?

M.C.: I think what is very important to remember about the United Kingdom or France or Spain or the large countries in Europe is that they are multiple states now. They are large nation states, but they are inhabited by many different groups speaking different languages with different religious traditions and so on. I think there are a lot of internal tensions within the societies themselves. But whether it'll come from the periphery is a very good question. I personally think it will, insofar as when you look at the way Translation Studies was largely shaped and changed and moved in more interesting directions because of the work that is done by the Dutch and Belgian scholars, then a similar thing may happen in the contemporary moment.

* A video with an unedited version of Michael Cronin's interview is available in JoSTans18: (http://www.jostrans.org/issue18/int_cronin.php)

¹ See Michael Cronin. *Translation and Globalization*. London and New York: Routledge, 2003. Michael Cronin, *Translation and Identity*. London and New York: Routledge, 2006.

² See Stuart Hall. "Political Belonging in a World of Multiple Identities." Ed. S. Vertovec and R.Cohen. *Conceiving Cosmopolitanism: Theory, Context, and Practice*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2003. 25-31.

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³ In Cronin. *Translation and Identity*, 14ff.

⁴ François Maspero. *Les Passagers du Roissy Express*. Paris: Seuil, 1990. Translated as *Roissy Express: A Journey through the Paris Suburbs*. Trans. Paul Jones. London: Verso, 1994.

⁵ See Benedict Anderson. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. 2nd rev. ed. London: Verso, 1991.

⁶ See, for instance, Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, eds. *The Invention of Tradition*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1983.

⁷ See Timothy Taylor. *The Artificial Ape: How Technology Changed the Course of Human Evolution*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010.

⁸ Michael Cronin. *Translation Goes to the Movies*. London and New York: Routledge, 2008.

⁹ See Régis Debray. *Introduction à la médiologie*. Paris: PUF, 2000.

¹⁰ See note 7 above.

¹¹ For the idea of translators as angels-mediators see *Translation and Globalization* 63, and Michel Serres. *La Légende des anges*. Paris: Flammarion, 1993; for the idea of “weak ties” see *Translation and Identity* 140ff, and Mark Granovetter. “The Strength of Weak Ties: A Network Theory Revisited.” *Sociological Theory* 1 (1983): 201–233.