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Maurer, Nadja

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# Interview with Jack Katz (Part 1/3): „Enigmas Attract Me“

NADJA MAURER 2019

During a lecture evening at the Hamburg Institute for Social Research (HIS), the American sociologist Jack Katz kindly agreed to give a longer interview on his previous scientific work and future research tasks.

## Part 1: Enigmas Attract Me

### On Social Ontology, Phenomenology and Yoga

**NM: Your work has become quite influential in criminology. How did sociology draw your attention in the very first place? When did you first think that sociology could be a thing?**

Jack Katz: When I was an adolescent, long before I knew the word sociology, I was focused on what now I would call interaction: how my peers were shaping themselves, doing things by anticipating how people would see them and respond. And I turned on that in everyday life. Like all adolescents, I was very self-conscious about how I would act and appear. How you walk and who you hang out with. What will people think of you if you are with this person or with that person? If you are in this place or in that place? I think everybody in adolescence does that more than before or later in life. Maybe it was just more extreme with me, or maybe I just grabbed on to it and said, “Ok, that’s who I am” [laughs].

While in college I probably was more influenced by anthropology. I was already studying psychology, and, being interested in Freud and Jung, I realized that that is not what psychologists are doing. They were running rats and mice and pigeons. That was not of any interest to me. In my undergraduate years I discovered that the work where people took a vantage point of perceiving and detecting interaction was called sociology. After the first year in law school I realized that I really wanted to do sociology rather than law. And then over the

summer, before applying to sociology graduate school, I read Howie Becker's *Outsiders*.<sup>[1]</sup>

**NM: That's a cool book. Still.**

Jack Katz: I thought: "I wish that I had written that." I realized that there are people who are doing things that I wish I did myself. So, I had the chance to go to study at Northwestern University where Becker was. And that kind of sealed the deal.

**NM: How and to what extent did the Chicago School influence and shape your thinking, your work, and your approach towards crime?**

Jack Katz: At Northwestern, there wasn't a big sense of distance between the faculty members and the students. They were almost friends. And so I also learned a lot outside the classroom from informal relations.

In my readings, probably the major figures were Howard Becker, Erving Goffman and Anselm Strauss.<sup>[2]</sup> And almost all of the students of Everett Hughes, who studied occupations, how people at work were interacting.<sup>[3]</sup> Their studies got attention, but as individuals they didn't get as much attention as Goffman, Strauss, and Becker.

Basically I read the texts of these interactionists and through their footnotes I found out who they'd read and I would read those people.

From them I got to appreciate that interaction is part of social ontology. Herbert Blumer used to put it as a kind of challenge: "Find me any instance of behavior in which the person is not anticipating what others will do, then or in the future, and shaping what they do in response. I bet you can't." <sup>[4]</sup> The point was to show that interaction is part of all social life. Of every social act. So, if you don't describe interaction, you are missing something.

That was the interaction side of social ontology. And then, primarily through John Kitsuse, I also came across ethnomethodology and phenomenology.<sup>[5]</sup> Kitsuse was a wonderful mentor. He could convey the essence of phenomenological perspective and ethnomethodology without fancy, complex, and mystifying

vocabulary (as, I found, did the philosopher phenomenologists). From very early on I understood that these vocabularies are not something I need to master. Instead I need to get for myself what I can work with. So, I never was concerned to represent phenomenology like a narrator of philosophical texts. I was always concerned to take it from there, and only read philosophy as long as I was getting tools for my own observation. Principally through reading Merleau-Ponty, I came to understand embodiment, the incorporation of some aspects of the environment in the formation of each instance of behavior, as a second aspect of social ontology.

At UCLA, where I started teaching, the faculty included Harold Garfinkel and Mel Pollner, ethnomethodologists whose work I had already read; and then I came to know the work of Emanuel Schegloff and others who were doing conversation analysis.<sup>[6]</sup> And I came to appreciate what they were doing with video tapes and recorded data. As a faculty member I always maintained a sense of myself as a student. I wanted to learn what I could. And so, I very intentionally studied what my colleagues were doing. And that brought me to appreciate that sequence, the production of behavior with regard to where it fits in an ongoing sequence, is the third aspect of social ontology

**NM: Goffman's sense of an individual is mainly that of an actor. According to him, people act only to be seen. It's all in Goffman's language: Primary frames, stages, backstage, and so forth. However, on the other hand, people do have existential emotions. They feel shame and fear of death and have ideas of freedom and ideas of pride. How do you see the relationship between role behavior and existential emotions?**

Jack Katz: You get to that when you look at the embodiment of action, which researchers working from the interaction side of the Chicago School do not. And the rational choice people don't really get at that either. That is what you get at through embodiment, through phenomenology, and that's what Becker and Goffman resisted. When I think about Sartrean existentialism, I see Sartre as a rationalist.

Even though interactionists like Becker and Goffman respected people like Sudnow, who bridged the gap and did both interactionist and phenomenologically sensitive ethnomethodological work, they refused to appreciate how we are always already taken, part of the environment, working off a background which we treat as being already there and continuous with ourselves.<sup>[7]</sup>

What carries us from one situation to the next, what is always with us, is our body. And while people are, as they are according to Goffman, always acting in anticipation of how others (including themselves in the future) will see them, they are also aware that the current situation will be succeeded by others. They know that the people that they are interacting with now will be replaced by others; and indeed they appreciate that in the moment, in the “right now” when they are interacting with whoever.

When I am talking with you, I am also interacting with other people who are not present. So, if I get really enthusiastic about something that is happening in our conversation, it’s because I am sensing, “Oh, this is a resource, this is of value for a future interaction that I will have that I am preparing now.” So, I am in at least two places at once. I am in multiple places at once.

And as I am registering all of that, I don’t show you. Because, consider what would happen if I tried. I would wander in our conversation; you would not be interested or be able to follow my train of thought. I am registering the meaning of what I express now, in the future, in other relationships (like writing projects), not in thought itself or alone but through my body, through my emotions. So, here and now, I can only show you one side of me. And, with some minor exceptions that in the end don’t undermine the point, that’s the side or aspect of myself that Goffman would focus on exclusively.

**NM: If anything is interaction, what are people who practice Yoga trying to achieve then? They actually try to not be in two places at once.**

Jack Katz: Right. My understanding is that they are trying to get more access, more awareness, of the embodiment of their conduct, which we are using tacitly. Yoga changes how you walk, how you sit, the angle you see everything at, and of course, how you feel. How your muscles take weight, and flow into gravity. It makes a difference. But unless you work on it, you are just realizing that there is a background body that we are always drawing on, but necessarily leave in the background. I have edited a book series and one of the books, authored by Michal Pagis, is about Vipassana meditation.<sup>[8]</sup> It’s an interesting study about a special, concerted effort to get out of interaction, to not be with others. The irony is that to get into the moment, into yourself, you need the collaboration of others. It’s hard to do alone. So, people get together to be alone. And that irony, that’s the sort of enigma that I think is a good lead for sociologists.

You know, we are usually interacting face-to-face, as we are now, we are not rear-to-rear. We are attending to a limited part of each other's bodies. But we are using our whole bodies to conduct a conversation. So what each of us uses, to express self to the other, is using more of the body than the other can see.

In some sense speech is an articulation, a making-manifest of all the movements of your body. All of one's body is behind, used in the expression of any utterance. But you have to keep your body in the background. Otherwise it won't be a resource for expression, for effective expression that another can grasp.

If you start to concentrate on how your tongue moves in your mouth and your lips move as you enunciate particular words, you won't be able to speak effectively. You lose your train of thought. You have to rely on the aesthetic, tacit body to produce your normally, competent, ordinary social behavior. So, there is a world of experience beneath or behind what we make available to others, and ourselves, reflexively, as we act. A world to discover.

So, yoga is a way to get in contact with that body and work out and improve it. It's very sensible. I don't personally do it much, hardly ever, but I appreciate what people are trying to do.

### **NM: What kind of topics attract you?**

Jack Katz: I think of myself as a naturalist, that is to say, I want to do naturalist science. To get as close as I could to the thing I am trying to explain. And to me that's a very different orientation than being affiliated with the explanations, the causes, the theories. The theories usually dominate the prestige in sociology, but I have thought that was generally a misguided way to do science. To do real science is to get as close as you can to the insect, to the bacteria, to the stars, and you observe. And then you work with theories of explanation but your real constant touchstone is the effort to get as close as you can get to the phenomena you want to understand, specify, explain. The further you move away from the variations in the phenomenon, the looser and the more problematic the explanation becomes. Anthropologists might be thought to work close to phenomena to some extent, but they have gone off from a naturalistic focus when they took a postmodern turn.

Here's an example of how I work, how I organize research from a start with enigmas in something that seems hard to understand.... I got interested in joyful cryings. It seems contradictory that people would cry in happy moments. How do

you explain that? Why people cry in joyful moments is an enigma. Enigmas attract me as topics. You know, something that happens naturally and yet, it's hard to figure out why. And I found absolutely nobody had.

I couldn't find anybody or anything in the nature of an explanation of joyful crying. Albeit, there were some explanations of sad cryings. So, I got every example I could. I took one of my children to a music recital. At the first music recital, parents cry when their children play. I went with my camera and I videotaped the other parents. Or at a certain school ceremony at Christmas time, they would do Silent Night for the deaf, in sign language. And when they do that, people are crying all over the place. So, I videotaped that. And then I'd do recordings at graduations and retirement ceremonies and so forth. I got a lot of videotapes of people crying. The chapter on laughter was taken at the Jardin d'Acclimation in Paris.<sup>[9]</sup> Most of the people were French speaking, but there were people from all over the world coming to this amusement park. The ambition in my work on emotions was to develop globally valid statements about anger, crying, laughter, and shame. So, I would pick up literature examples from various contexts and when I was in Paris I filmed.

**NM: In European philosophy throughout the 20th century there were basically two different philosophical ways to approach phenomena. One was about "life" in an existential sense and the other one about "concept". On the one side the likes of Bergson, Deleuze, Sartre, Bachelard, or Merleau-Ponty dealt with the question of life while others, thinkers such as Levi-Strauss, Lacan, Althusser, or Brunschvicg, are more concerned with the concept.**

Jack Katz: I came across Merleau-Ponty and phenomenology at Northwestern and have continued to read him for decades.<sup>[10]</sup> I saw Merleau-Ponty as representing the life naturalistically, as being inspired by immediate experience and trying to find the words that would best capture lived experience.<sup>[11]</sup> Through Merleau-Ponty, I developed a sensitivity to ways of embodiment and the intertwining of self and world, including other people. I came to understand that the embodiment of the environment is a taken-for-granted resource that we use as an extension or a continuation of the body. I should add, another important influence was Michael Polanyi, who developed his own vocabulary, his own way of writing to grasp the same basic insight.<sup>[12]</sup>

## **NM: What is it that you describe as social ontology?**

Jack Katz: Social ontology specifies the facets of any social act, no matter what it is. In addition to interaction and embodiment, social ontology includes the sequential aspect of all social behavior. From my colleagues studying conversation analysis I could see that their emphasis, their take-off point for the contributions they were making, was really sequence. They could map and describe sequence in a way that nobody had ever been able to before. Describing sequence means describing how a given act, a person doing a particular gesture or making a particular utterance, was based on the one just before and the one the actor anticipated would come. So, every act is not only an interaction with others and an anticipation of how they will respond. Every act is also shaped in relation to a prior act, and shaped to be a next that the actor or another would take as a prior to a subsequent action. In other words, every act anyone does is in two time zones.

Everything you can observe in social life is shaped to be in a sequence. We are always in at least two places at once. We are never in just one place. If I am brushing my teeth, I am following the specific sequence to brush my teeth. I put the toothpaste on and then I put the brush in my mouth. When I put the brush in my mouth before the toothpaste, I realize it, because it doesn't feel right. So, I am appearing to myself as a confident teeth cleaner. Even if nobody else is present, I am interacting with myself as doing something in a competent way by following a sequence.

But I am also thinking about what I am doing next in life, what I will do at some time after putting the toothbrush down. I am shaping myself to fit into multiple, simultaneous sequences.

To do that, I am relying on a sensibility, not on thought I follow deductively (unless I make a mistake, and then I "think" about what I'm doing). And that sensibility is a kind of embodied feeling. That also is part of social ontology, part of how we act. The stream of embodiment that carries our conduct, the feelings or emotions or "sense" we have at any moment, is our way of orienting to the demands to fit our action into the sequences, multiple sequences, that we acknowledge or promote as organizing our lives.

When I taught classes at the university, I organized my teaching around works that emphasize what you, as a researcher or observer, can see when you look at sequence; what you can see when you look at interaction; what you can see when you look at embodiment. And you always see more when you follow the demands of social ontology.



**NM: *Seductions of Crime* breaks with two previous approaches to explaining crime. Some argue that it took sociology away from rational choice explanations, and others find that it dismisses sociodemographic factors of crime. During the work process, was *Seductions of Crime* a discomfort with rational choice for you or did you try to distance yourself from structural factors?**

Jack Katz: That project started when I started teaching at the university. In order to construct a series of lectures to teach criminology, I had to look for materials and I looked for the closest descriptions of what criminals do. And to find those materials, I had to look and look and look and look. Criminology was so abstract and so concerned really with the explanans, the causes, and so little concerned with the explanandum, the thing that we are trying to explain. And it was so biased to that, that there was little that I could find of use in what was conventionally considered criminology.

But I found a lot of biographies, interviews, and some ethnographies. And basically, that became the materials for writing *Seductions of Crime*.[\[13\]](#)

On the one hand you can read *Seductions of Crime* as anti-rational choice; on the other hand there are ways of reading it as in line with rational choice. And I have seen people who read it both ways. To me, it was just a matter of getting close to the explanandum and working towards an explanation from an initial and abiding commitment to get the best possible description of variations in the things I was trying to explain.

That's the variation I am trying to explain. That is, I focused on the variation, not between those who do or don't do crime, which risks losing sequence and sets up lots of problems of "controlling" for many differences between the offenders and non-offenders, but I focused on how people get into doing crime: what were they doing just before, what do they do as they are doing crime, what changes in the course of the behavior of doing crime, and then how do they segue to not doing a crime, to what they do next? This approach is not incompatible with a focus on the relevance to crime of what fits under that strange term, "structure."

**NM: Is there such a thing as a structural explanation then?**

Jack Katz: This is a strange vocabulary that social scientists use. I don't like the idea of structure at all. I think it is just sloppy language. What is a structure in life? A structure is this here [knocks against wall]. Everything is changing constantly.

But yes, people talk about how crime occurs more in some age groups, ethnic groups, economic groups; how crime among men more than women. Those are legitimate questions about crime. I think you can get to some of that if you work naturalistically, by starting with a detailed description of changes in the explanandum, in the doing of crime itself.

There is a section in *Seductions of Crime* that argues that violence is a way of being masculine. It's not that you are compelled to do violence if you are masculine. But it is a way of doing masculinity. And it doesn't seem to be a way of doing femininity. Even though women can do violence. And they sometimes do. But it's compatible with constructing that version of yourself. And similarly with race. No one is compelled to commit crimes because of their racial identity. But doing crime in certain ways, like expressing oneself as a "badass," can be a form of defiance, a nihilism and a celebration of egocentrism. In African-American historical struggles, as in the historical struggles that other ethnic or racial groups recognize, communities can celebrate outlaws, the defiant, the badasses, as a way of expressing an aspect of ethnic/racial identity that has been repressed.

**NM: How do social processes on the micro and on the macro-level connect?**

**By today the only theory that has gained a degree of popularity is Bourdieu's concept of habitus. Critics have rightly raised objections that the concept is way too static and does not capture the fluidity and processuality of life. How would you "think the link" from a phenomenological perspective?**

Jack Katz: There are at least two problems with habitus. One, it is just a place-keeper. It's a black box. How do you develop it? What does it actually consist of? It's been disappointing that people who have embraced the concept don't do the work of showing what it is. Show me in people's lives how they do it. Not just your glossy characterization that is habitus. But what does it consist of?

I think if you did, you'd see the notion that habitus is a foundation for, or a resource for high social status, just disappears very quickly. You just can't see it.

The notion that there is anything about cultural capital or habitus that explains why, especially in the US, people have wealth, is far from obvious. If you look at how people accumulate or grab wealth, habitus is not how they get it. And conversely, people that have what would be considered high cultural capital might be university professors, but they are not the entrepreneurs, or the people with inherited wealth.

But the second problem is really that habitus is one of these intellectual games that replaces a confrontation with chaos with a vocabulary that claims pattern. As intellectuals, we can take anything that happens in the world and find patterns and order in it. If you want to understand and explain change on the large scale, such as crime rate differences, then I am not suggesting that you study the evolution of particular acts of violence in their situations. That's where "habitus" lives, as a personal way of acting.

To understand macro change in violence, on the scale of the rise and fall of violent crime in the US since 1960, you should focus on circles of violence, the core units. And then you are closer to getting at the historical changes and societal trends and pressures that can warrant "structural" explanations.[\[14\]](#)

In a way, "habitus" continues the Parsonian total-theorizing impulse that is so attractive in sociology. We can explain all...even if we cannot empirically, with evidence...we have a theoretical scheme that is neat, that has multiple analytical levels, from the macro to the meso to the micro. And "habitus" is the concept that fills out the micro level. "Habitus" is a misguided call to focus on something close to the psychological level, in order to understand macro or large scale social and historical differences. And that's a fundamental mistake.

"Habitus" is a product of mid-20th century thinking, both as a part of a totalizing intellectual scheme and as part of an effort to explain inequalities in forms that no longer are specifically relevant. Now with the "one percent" or "one percent of one percent" controlling so much wealth, to argue that there is something about the habitus of the elite wealth set that distinguishes them is on the face of it...well, let's say not very promising.

Bourdieu is the last of sociology's great theory singers, a phrase I've used elsewhere.[\[15\]](#) Like Parsons and Marx, his emphasis is on the explanans, not the explanandum. He has something to say about everything, as religions do. But nowhere is he concerned to carefully examine differences in the matters he would explain, and to use descriptive precision to show the explanatory payoff of his ideas in any domain. That's the habitus of power, whether in politics, religion or 20th century sociology.

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[14] The Public Lecture “Unspeakable: The mysterious rise and fall of crime since 1960” in the Hamburg Institute for Social Research on 16<sup>th</sup> April 2019: [Audio](#) or [Video](#)

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