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Interview with Jack Katz (Part 2/3): On Fieldwork, Data, and Writing

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.

“Humor is a representation of two perspectives in juxtaposition”

On Fieldwork, Data, and Writing

NM: How do you do sociology?

Jack Katz: What is seen as sociology is a certain form of writing that is put before academic audiences. But I am always doing sociology in a way.

Actually, I sometimes re-read things that I have written, and I don't know who wrote them. I get so into it and I am responding to versions or drafts, so that it evolves, and when it finally is published, it looks very different to me than what I recognize as what I do.

I find new topics by probably just responding, not planning. I read a lot of materials and I continually try to develop a sensibility. I look around and whatever is in front of me, I start with. I always preferred to study something that was at hand, that was real, that was going on and that I had access to. That I knew was of historical interest. I have always done things that way.

When I started to teach, I had been studying white collar crime and the prosecution of white collar criminal cases, in part because grants became available. I was at Yale Law School and they could get me into a government office, so I said, “yes”. I just went with that. Then when I started teaching, I had to

teach something, so “criminology” seemed closest to what I’d been doing. Out of that came *Seductions of Crime*.

All along I am seeing candidates for intensive study. When I did the emotions book, I would look for places where I could study anger, or laughter, or crying.^[1] Where I could get repeated—and in some cases videotaped—instances. Sometimes, like on “angry drivers” I had students do interviews.^[2] In one case I was working for the defense of a fellow who was up for execution because he had murdered somebody. I was asked to help this guy. I got the videotape of his confession. And he cries during it. I said, “Ok, I’ll use that video tape to see what I can understand about crying.” For the book I started to look around for examples of different emotions. And made collections. So, that was a time, a phase of making collections.

NM: Throughout the fieldwork you have conducted, did you have some troubling moments or moments when the fieldwork did something with you as a researcher? Having worked in post-conflict environments myself, I know that it sometimes can happen.

Jack Katz: It’s not as if I go to a place and see something and then react to it. I meet people, I go to places, and I realize something that is in me already. And I make contact with it.

I realize in observing something that I have already lived a version of it. My touchstone is probably my own experience in getting angry, in laughter, in joyful crying, in shame, all these things. Certainly I have been moved.

One of the experiences I recall most vividly is being moved in interviews by just how naked people are. When you ask questions that make sense to people, they get so naked about their lives. Sometimes you are hearing things nobody else has heard. Not even the people who know them intimately. I remember feeling shame about that quite often. And I was trying to talk in a reciprocal way about myself and then often, they don’t want to hear. They are not interested in that. It’s their chance to talk.

It may be that I have always pulled myself out to reflect on things at the same time as I am observing them. I remember a situation when a woman described being tied up and gang raped in front of her husband. I was sitting with her and she is confiding in me with this and it’s very moving and you have a sense of your responsibilities to handle it as sensibly and sensitively as you can. But, you know,

I always think my obligation in intervening in people's lives is to do what I can for the reader. The only justification for me being there and bothering people and getting into their lives is that I have something to offer the reader. It's not the sympathy; my expression of sympathy will not mean much to her, much less to my readers. I take the question to be: can I justify the time I am spending, their time they are spending, the risk they are taking in talking to me, their emotional openness. If there is a justification for what I do, it must be in service to an audience I have in mind. What contribution can I make that justifies this? Maybe that makes me relatively insensitive, I don't know.

NM: What does the process of ethnographic work look like for you? From material to data, from data to narrative, from narrative to text, from text to debate?

Jack Katz: Right. It depends on where you are in a project. Generally, I like the image of going to a new city and getting lost and then trying to find your way around. I like that as the kind of image of how I would like to operate. However, at some point, you do make a map and you figure out where you are in a larger whole; you don't stay lost forever.

I don't find it appealing to read and say, "Ok. Here are two hypotheses. I am gonna find the test case that will decide which of these hypothesis is correct." That sort of thing I think I turned away from very early in my career.

I would rather read things that seem illuminating and then in the course of living find things that get luminous. I wrote a couple of papers on luminous data and that I allow to guide me.^[3] Something that stands out. And that, initially, I am not quite sure why. But I think what contributes to it is the preparation for surprise, and that comes from the reading that I have done over time.

NM: You advise ethnographers to look after luminous data. The "revealing", the "rich" stuff, in short, stuff that catches the eye in one's own material.

Jack Katz: Read good studies and good philosophy, things that are moving, things that will teach you to keep in touch with social ontology. I could spend a week on one essay from Merleau-Ponty and looking at art the way he would look at. How Cezanne painted and tried to cultivate a sensibility. But then go out anywhere and just stay until something stands out. And then you build up from there.

Of course, at some point, to go back to the example of getting lost in the city, you need to find a place to stay, a place to eat, how to get to an appointment on time; you need to develop a map of the city. And then it changes. Then your experiences are, "Is this map right or is it wrong?" And you improve the map over time. And you try to focus on: "Where are the ambiguous parts of this map? Which part of this territory do I have and have not mapped yet?" Then you get more driven by the necessities of the project. So, it's not just one thing. It's a dialectic.

NM: It's a highly dialectic reasoning between data, where parts of it can be luminous and others maybe not, and the researcher engaging in that dialectic. Reasoning about data that you have gathered and selected yourself also means engaging with yourself. Can you draw a sharp line between luminous data and reflexivity?

Jack Katz: Well, the word reflexivity is used a lot and I am not sure if I understand always what people mean by it. Luminous data is something I am caught by because it seems poignant or enigmatic. And I trust my instincts at that point. That they had been cultivated. That anything banal wouldn't draw my attention. That there is something there that requires explanation. That will reveal itself the more you dig. I don't know if that's reflection or just sustained closer observation. I look more at the details of it. You need to trust your guts and avoid that "Oh, this fits with habitus." Or, "Oh, now I am seeing class conflict" or something. And then later at some point you develop your writing project, and then you think, what are the chapters going to be (like).

NM: A propos writing. Yours is jolly good entertainment. It's humorous, it's very pointed, and I love the metaphors. Is your writing style a means of illustration or didactics or is it more a heuristic means?

Jack Katz: I don't think I have talked to this before. To continue what we are discussing, wherever there's humor, there is a representation of two perspectives in juxtaposition. Humor resolves always at least two perspectives in juxtaposition. And appreciating perspectives in juxtaposition should be part of our work. That there isn't more humor in sociological writing is a sign of defect. Because if you are grasping the perspective of the people you are studying and then you are writing for readers who are not those people, you are mashing together different perspectives. Readers have other concerns; you are going

between two worlds constantly. And you should appreciate the juxtaposition of those two worlds. And that's a basis for emotionally moving writing. It's not a special effort.

For example, this topic of anger among drivers, which I wrote about in "Pissed off in L.A." ... when people get angry when driving, the people themselves, a few moments later, look back and juxtapose their prior understanding with what they were in the moment and say, "How did I come to do that?" They themselves, from one moment to the next, are in two different worlds.

So, if you are with the people, you understand that people aren't so mono-thematic. Nor are they consistent. They are reflecting on who they were a moment ago.

The difference between what I try to do, and what is often called empathetic observation or reflection is that the people we study themselves are moving between being taken by a situation and then framing the situation as something they were in as they look at themselves. It is their empathy and reflection that we can profitably focus on: who they were at time 1, when they were or were not empathetic with others, and who they are at time 2 when they reflect on what happened at time 1.

And then in a third situation we are writing it up. If you write, you register your awareness that there are these at least three different frames going on. The people are at two points in time and you yourself writing are at a third point in time. And then there's maybe a fourth time when the readers are going to read, and that is an infinite fourth, because there is infinite potential readers at infinite times in history.

From this perspective, as a sociologist you can get some sense of multiple juxtapositions that you can work into your writing. By contrast, the kind of writing that takes one theory and one vocabulary and imposes it—boom boom boom, like a machine—on whatever the data conveys, all you can see about the people is what they are at a given moment in terms of this analytic language. But that's not life. People are always in multiple time frames.

[1] Katz, Jack (1999): *How Emotions Work*. University of Chicago Press.

[2] Katz, Jack (ibid): "Pissed Off in L.A." (chapter 1)

[3] Katz, Jack (2001): From How to Why. On Luminous Description and Causal Inference in Ethnography (Part I). In: *Ethnography* 2 (4), 443-473.