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# Interview with Jack Katz (Part 3/3): Confrontation with Chaos

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.

## Confrontation with Chaos

### On Falling, Dizziness, and Circles of Chaos

**NM: How do you conceptually combine extreme emotions, for example rage or extreme anger, and role behavior? How do you bring those together whenever people are literally falling out of their role?**

Jack Katz: I appreciate the question. I wrote a paper on that.<sup>[1]</sup> The biblical story of Adam and Eve is so appealing to people; it has been told so often, it has been represented so often in painting and narrative because in effect it reprises what we experience multiple times every day: a fall. A fall out of paradise.

What is paradise? A paradise is an unselfconscious competence, as it was in the pre-sin world of Adam and Eve. They fall, when they eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil; they become self-conscious. And self-critical.

And we go through that transition all the time when we are routinely acting with the sense of normal competency. And then there is a fall, a break. And how do you respond to the break?

Well, there are at least four ways. You can get angry that somebody pushed you or left a banana peel there and you fell. You can laugh, which is a recognition, done through braiding the two realities with your breaking body, which is what you do when you do laughter...laughing about your fall is recognizing that you have shifted from being one sort of apparently competent person to this other. Like slapstick comedy. All comedy always has used the fall.

You can cry, responding to the fact that it hurts, whether it is your dignity that is hurt, or whether you are physically hurt. It gets mixed up in crying.

Or you can just get ashamed and not know what to do.

In any case, the shift from normal role behavior to extreme emotions, is, as your question was suggesting, through a fall.

And then, how do you come out of it? And that's also a matter of personality differences. And of who you are at different times in life. If four people fall, one will cry, one will get angry and blame somebody, one will get ashamed and one will laugh about it.

**NM: How can violent perpetrators manage the tension between personhood and selfhood? That is, their idea of themselves as being a social being, a persona, and their self-concept must be troubled in case of extreme violence. Nobody really says, "Well, that's me" and takes pride in violent behavior without a shadow of a doubt. How do people bring this inner conflict into convergence?**

Jack Katz: Well, some people do say, "That's me". And for some people, it really IS them. Nietzsche understood this. And he also understood that what he said would not be understood and would not be accepted. It is still an ongoing challenge to accept that there is chaos in people's lives. People are chaotic, some more than others or in ways more extreme. And for them, to embrace who they are most authentically is to embrace destruction. For them to act in conformity and to deny their violent tendencies is to deny who they are.

Now, violence at the same time is a kind of transition or transformation. An effort to transform chaos. I describe it as dizziness. As a switching between different perspectives. A dizziness or chaos can be transformed into a robbery or even a killing, which can be ordered narratives. The robbery or killing occurs on a certain stage; it is, in aspiration if not execution, a tidy drama; and the project of turning chaos into a simple narrative often has a measure of success.

There is a self-deception in that. Because if you really embrace the chaos, you don't think that you can transform it into order. You use violence as an attempt to transcend from the chaos.

And what usually happens is, you create more chaos. But first of all, in somebody else's lives you can displace it, you can create a perfect killing, a perfect destruction. And there's tremendous joy in that. A simple flick of a finger on a house of cards can have miraculous destructive effects.

**NM: People who have lots of chaos within themselves are still social beings. I mean, they are not lone wolves.**

Jack Katz: Well, yes and no. You can have a loving mother who sometimes beats the hell out of you. You can have a father who you admire, and he seems to care for you but not enough ever to be there. And who himself is a vicious person who beats up people. Or the siblings who take joy in your suffering, it seems, and dominating you. You have bosses who sometimes give you opportunities and then seem to turn on you and kick you out when it is to their advantage.

So, the chaos is not asocial. It is being in relations that are chaotic, that are unpredictable, that serve other people's needs, that you don't understand. Because, for the violent criminals we want to understand, all this starts long before you come to the age of reason and self-reflection. You are already formed in this circumstance. You have already been with the mother who abuses you and the father who is heroic but never there. You are already with them. You are already on the other side, being with them against yourself as you grow. So, this is already social.

There's no need, it seems to me, to talk in a psychological way that cuts away from the social. But it's embodied, it's in emotions, it's in the kind of feeling you use routinely in an unconscious way ("it" being the social). Recognizing that all behavior is social doesn't mean denying that chaos is a real, an authentic, distinguishable experience and way of life that distinguishes some people from others whose lives are ordered.

And, coming back to what we talked about earlier, chaos is not a certain kind of habitus. There is a certain way of trying to manage chaos, such that you could talk about some sort of habitus. But by putting a neat label on it, you don't get at the real dynamic wildness of chaos, or dizziness in people's lives. People sometimes are dizzy. They don't know what to do. They crawl one way, they have crawled another way, they crawled a third way. Some people lash out in a course of action that they hope will resolve the chaos, that will end all the spinning around, all these influences; and they end up usually just undermining their lives.

You have to acknowledge the reality of dizziness. Some people get depressed. Academics themselves are likely to experience chaos more on the road to depression than to violence. But it's the same sort of thing. When you have so many conflicting influences on you. Depression isn't a lack of stimulus, it's like an over-stimulus. It's a matter of experiencing having multiple demands on you from different people that you cannot satisfy. For example, the dad who the police are after because he hasn't paid child support could end being on the run if he pays child support, but if he does he can't pay back a debt that he has to some guy that he has bought drugs from. And if he pays that guy back then there is somebody else that expects him to help out because they are planning a legal or illegal job. They need some sort of aid from him, and he has to get some resources for that, and in the meantime there is a relative who is a drug addict and is pressuring for aid for that and so on. You are simply in a dizzying state where there is a demand and if you satisfy any one demand you are failing to satisfy others. It is simply being in a chaotic phase of life. Where to satisfy any one set of demands or one set of people, you have to disappoint others.

And we don't live that life. So, it's easy just to think it's another kind of pattern, another kind of habitus. But no, it's really fundamentally different from how we deal with things; we are insured, with jobs or fellowships, with expectations and lots of resources that can help us when we are in trouble. A lot of people, really if they resolve one problem, they are creating other problems. And they are betraying promises they had made to people: "Ok, you are gonna pay me back, you are gonna help me out with the rent, you are gonna be here to visit the child at the school graduation, you're gonna show up on the job." And there is a spiral ... the book *On the Run*<sup>[2]</sup>, really, is probably the best single grasp of this.

### **NM: Is all that not pretty much due to poverty?**

Jack Katz: Well, yes (nods). But to call the ways of poverty, another habitus or, an application might be Eli Anderson's *Code of the Street* which is a brilliant book and essential but can be read as saying "There is order. Chaos has its own kind of order."<sup>[3]</sup> Well, no. I mean, there is a special kind of culture, a special understanding of semiotics as enacted on the street, but there is a distinctive chaos too. You don't do the code of the street unless there is a real danger that you are going to get ambushed.

**NM: What changes quickly whenever you are poor is that your sequences of planning diminish. You just live from day to day, and if things are getting worse, you are living from morning to lunch. Your capability of managing your life shrinks to the extent your stress increases.**

Jack Katz: Very good. Exactly. It shrinks. Yes, I mean, there are background factors like poverty. And you can get to the meso-level and you can get to the macro-level, what and who is in the circumstances and so forth. But don't deny the core of it by saying, "It's just another kind of habitus. Another kind of ordered way of being that people learn to master."

**NM: Having the notion of inner chaos in the back of your mind, how do you relate, in the research of violence, one situation with the situatedness one person finds him- or herself in?**

Jack Katz: People are situated in a circle of chaos. If your neighbor who looks to be a tough guy asks you to hide a gun because the police are coming by, or asks you to lend him some money, or offers you drugs, you'd better say no. You'd better get the hell out. These are sticky people. And you will be drawn in. And the day will come when you have to make a tough decision.

The macro-historical formations of circles of chaos and where they are is one thing. But then the moments of violence spring up sporadically and not necessarily in a way that is predictable for the victims or even for the people doing the violence.

Serious criminal violence often grows out of situations in which someone in chaos is coming across somebody and there's an opportunity and they can get away with something. For example, during the Rodney King riots there were a lot of murders. And then in retrospect they found that a number of them were people who already had disputes going on. But they took the riots as a kind of smoke screen to enact revenge. Ok, there is your chance. You go for it.<sup>[4]</sup> In circles of chaos, people tend not to do fatal violence unless they have had some experience with doing violence in the past. So, if you are near people who you know do violence, you are getting close to it. And they are with other people who have done violence. You are close to entering relations where things sporadically and unpredictably could turn in ways that you don't expect.

**NM: Thank you very much, Jack.**

[1] Jack Katz (1996): The Social Psychology of Adam and Eve. In: *Theory and Society* 25 (4), 545-582.

[2] Goffman, Alice (2014): *On the Run: Fugitive Life in an American City*. Chicago, University of Chicago Press.

[3] Anderson, Elijah (1999): *Code of the Street: Decency, Violence, and the Moral Life of the Inner City*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company Inc.

[4] See also: Katz, Jack (2016): Culture Within and Culture About Crime: The Case of the "Rodney King Riots". In: *Crime Media Culture* 12 (2), 233-251.