

How Did I Become a Historical Economic Sociologist? Viviana Zelizer in Conversation with José Ossandón

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Abstract

In this interview, Viviana Zelizer discusses three dimensions that characterize her distinctive sociological approach to the economy. First, Zelizer explains how she made archival historical analysis her sociological method. Second, she talks about the relational character of her objects of study. Third, Zelizer discusses the part played by gender politics in her work.

Keywords: Economic Sociology; Zelizer; Sociology of Money; Historical Methods; Gender.

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The interview was conducted in 2010, when Viviana Zelizer visited the Universidad Diego Portales in Chile. The original conversation was in Spanish and video recorded (the video is available here: <https://estudiosdelaeconomia.com/2011/01/04/para-una-aproximacion-relacional-e-historica-de-la-economia-una-entrevista-con-viviana-zelizer/>). It has not been published before. It was especially transcribed and translated for *Sociologica*. I thank Macarena Barros and Francisca Lillo Razeto for their help with the transcription and translation. I am very grateful for Viviana's help in this process. I am also very grateful for the way in which Viviana has advised and encouraged me and many other researchers of my generation over the years. I hope I can learn a bit from her generous model of how to inspire and help younger scholars.

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1 Introduction

When I conducted this interview, the idea was to use it as a means of introducing Viviana's work to a wider readership.¹ Accordingly, instead of focusing on the most recent work, the conversation covered her oeuvre more generally. This is why, or so I hope, it works, still today, as a good introduction to some of the key aspects that make Zelizer's approach to the study of economic life so particular. The interview covers three main dimensions in Zelizer work: how she uses historical archive methods, the construction of relational objects of analysis, and the gender politics implicit in her more recent books.

2 Sociology and Historical Archives

José Ossandón (JO): We, sociologists, tend to classify ourselves in terms of the methods we use. There are the "quantitative ones" that conduct surveys, do network analyses, structural analyses, modelling, etc., while "qualitative sociologists" are generally associated with in-depth interviews and ethnography.

Viviana Zelizer (VZ): And I am neither of them. [Laughs].

JO: Indeed. But, if one has to classify your work in one of these two categories, it would surely be qualitative. However, you have chosen historical archival work, and not observation or interviews, as your favourite method of data collection and inquiry. The first question is: how did you become an archival researcher?

VZ: The main method — up to the book *The Purchase of Intimacy* (Zelizer, 2005) — had been historical, based on archival research. It is, basically, the approach a historian might use. But the theoretical part is different, the questions that lead the inquiry are different from the ones an orthodox historian might pose. It all began by accident. Although I would have probably still relied on qualitative methods, like interviews, something like that. I was a PhD student at Columbia and in the second year, I was awarded a scholarship from the NIMH (Social History Traineeship Program, National Institute of Mental Health) designed to train students of history in social scientific methods and social scientists in historical methods. There was a group of five graduate students in history and us, two women, the only sociologists, who were trained in historical methods. The scholarship lasted four years, they covered all your expenses under the condition that the thesis was to be written on American history. To be honest, until then for me, history consisted of boring dates about one particular event after another, dates and events, which I would forget anyway. But, then I discovered social history, and I was fascinated by it. As a result, I did the thesis on life insurance, with the question of why there was so much opposition to life insurance in the United States in the nineteenth-century (Zelizer, 1979). It was social history. I don't want to talk too much about it, but this was in a period when historical methods in sociology were not yet established. Someone told me "you're never going to get a position with that kind of research!" Only later on did it become fashionable. I can tell you more about the method if you're interested, or should I stop?²

JO: Yes, please continue. How did you go on using archival historical methods and what are the advantages you see in it?

VZ: There are two features of how I applied the historical method. The first one and obvious is that it is done through analysis of historical documents. And, the second one, which was not deliberate but emerged from the investigations is a focus on social conflicts. In the case of insurance, the debate was over whether it was morally acceptable to insure human life. And, then, in a way, every book was born from the previous one. Also by chance, when I was writing the book on life insurance [*Morals*

1. Even though Viviana Zelizer was born in Argentina, her academic career has taken place in the US. It was only in the late 2000s that her books started to be translated into Spanish (*The Purchase of Intimacy* was published in Spanish in 2009 and *The Social Meaning of Money* in 2011).

2. Since 2011 Zelizer has been conducting for the first time personal interviews for a study of the college economy (Zelizer & Gaydosh, 2019).

and *Markets: The Development of Life Insurance in the United States* (Zelizer, 1979)], I discovered a note about a controversy regarding children's insurance. This became the clue that led me to the second book [*Pricing the Priceless Child: The Changing Social Value of Children* (Zelizer, 1985)], which then expanded to other topics related to childhood. This book was also about a social conflict (this time, it was over the valuation of children's lives) and drew from historical data. Then came the book about money [*The Social Meaning of Money* (Zelizer, 1994)]. When I studied children's history, I became fascinated by the whole issue regarding allowances, children's allowances, and combined with my earlier interest in "death money" connected to life insurance led me to the study of money. Now, when I started to write *The Purchase of Intimacy* (Zelizer, 2005), the plan was to pursue an historical analysis in a period I was already very familiar with, from 1870 to 1930. I expected to focus on cases of legal disputes regarding issues concerning negotiations of intimacy. And, I have a collection of cases from that period! But then I realized that doing such a detailed historical analysis was not what interested me at that time. So, the method changed again. This time the legal part, case selection, was more opportunistic and strategic. I read hundreds of cases and then picked the cases that really portrayed the theoretical problem of the mixture of intimacy and the economy and what happened when there were legal conflicts, how the law saw this mix. So, of course, there is historical data, but there are also important changes in the method. What I have never done are quantitative analyses. It is not my style, it's not how I think.

3 Relational Approach and Economic Sociology

JO: You started to publish your first books in the late 1970s and early 1980s. This was a context when economic sociology was associated mainly with a structural approach, with a focus on embeddedness and the study and modeling of social networks. We could say that an "objective" or positivist stance characterized the most influential sociological studies of the economy. Within that scenario, your work appears as a very different type of research, deeply qualitative and case based. Now, one would generally expect someone who uses qualitative methods to be more focused on how actors *think*, their sense-making or their actions. However, your focus is different. Particularly in your last few books, you have started to pay more and more attention to these little social formations, that is, the "circuits of commerce." But, I would say, even in your previous work on social conflicts, you made controversies, moral frictions and tensions your object of inquiry. You seem to be more interested in relations or relational objects (circuits or tensions) than in what people think. Thus, one might think, in this context, that there is another way to connect your work and the other economic sociology that focuses on networks. For example, lately, people speak of a "cultural turn" within the sociology of networks, notably in Harrison White's (2008) latest work...

VZ: Definitely.

JO: ...where networks are not so "cold" anymore, but where scholars pay more attention to how stories matter, and how these stories might create symbolic barriers and how actors manage to switch and construct their identities in the crossings between these different stories. So, my question is whether, in this context, you see different, and perhaps better, conditions for a dialogue between your work and other economic sociologies?

VZ: Your question is perfect, because it places me exactly where I am. I discuss a little bit about that in the introduction of *Economic Lives* (Zelizer, 2011). Placing me as a historical character, which is not that interesting, but since we are talking about this... When I wrote my PhD thesis — which later became *Morals and Markets* — I didn't have a clue that I was contributing to economic sociology. There was, as you know, the old economic sociology of Weber and the classics. But the "New Economic Sociology" had just begun in those years, with Granovetter, and, just as you say, in a form that was emphatically structural, and by decision of those who contributed to that, it was an explicit choice to differentiate themselves from Parsons, they didn't want to speak of Parsonian values and culture. Now they have changed, just as you say. In those times, what I was really interested in was the question of how human life and economic value are mixed. And, I think, but I am not sure, so I can't prove it (so, I didn't

write it in the introduction of the book), that a great part of my integration in economic sociology, now more mainstream, has a lot to do with Richard Swedberg. Swedberg, who is someone who has expertly codified the economic sociology terrain, categorized me, at the very beginning, as the only, basically, along with Paul Di Maggio, “cultural ones.” So, it wasn’t a sort of a “Oh! I’m contributing to economic sociology!” kind of decision. On the contrary, it happened slowly, and, clearly, what I was doing was peripheral, not just in relation to the structural methods, but also in relation to the topics of research. The main topics, which have continued to be so, are the firms, companies, corporations, are not the kind of world I that have explored. That’s why, in a certain way, there’s room for this last book [*Economic Lives*], because my thematic focus has been different too. Now that you have said it, it’s completely right. Despite the fact that I love to understand the way people think, both in reading academic work or even in ordinary interactions as when I listen to a taxi driver who tells me has been married for sixty years, I have not focused on individual stories. That is true, and more and more so, but what you’ve made me see is that also from the beginning and not just lately, my focus has been on social relations, social connections. In a way, I overdid it, I put much more emphasis on that. One person who influenced me very much, after I had written several books, was Charles Tilly and my friendship with him. He was a relational absolutist. Our conversations led me more in that direction. But, as you said, there was already something of it, in the sense that it wasn’t an individualistic psychological analysis of what was going on, which could’ve perfectly well been the case. What I can see now, in a certain way, is that there is a world of young people in economic sociology that understand what I’m doing. In some kind of way, they are moving towards the cultural side or towards meaning and content of social ties. Harrison White, I agree. The others... Well, I would also say that Mark Granovetter has written about the cultural side. He is a brilliant man who understands that that is important too, but, because of strategic intellectual reasons, he adopted such an emphatically structural method. About circuits, yes, but I don’t know if all of that makes me closer to the type of study of firms... Theoretically, it should put me closer, but, thematically, it is so different from what they’re doing. But what I do observe is that younger researchers take the concepts of “commercial circuits” and “relational work” and understand them. They use them and make these concepts useful as a way of thinking social and economic processes they are observing and don’t know how to explain. That’s what I see. I don’t know, you do what you can.

4 A Feminist Politics?

JO: My last question. Especially in your book *The Purchase of Intimacy* (Zelizer, 2005) you emphatically argue against what is perhaps the most influential stance in the social studies of the economy. What you call “hostile worlds,” where money and the social are conceived as separate spheres, and most of the attention focuses on how money commoditizes, transforms, and pollutes the social world. You point out the limits of such an approach — as you also discuss the limits of what you term the “nothing but” approach, where the assumption is that actors follow the same goals wherever they are situated. Now, my question is about the politics in your work. My impression is that, while you clearly stand against the politics attached to the hostile world stance (namely, analysts that write from a critical position towards the commoditization of the social), there is in your work a, perhaps more subtle political stance. What I see is that it has a lot more to do with gender politics, and how the expansion of money does not always mean more subjection or domination, but, it could even be the other way round. The stories you tell, for instance regarding how money is managed at home and how domestic relations in relation to money at home have changed over time, narrate a political history, but, perhaps, a less explicit political story. My question is whether this is true, and how central is this political stance in your work?

VZ: Yes. It could be that due to my own gender identity I haven’t become an explicit political scholar. Or, it could also be the influence of American sociology that is not political in general. I mean, if I would have pursued a career in Buenos Aires... Well, I wouldn’t have [laughs]... In those times, sociology was a problematic field and I think the specialty was actually banned for some time. But, yes, there is an implicit political agenda. And in some kind of way, that agenda is more alive now than in the previous books. What I mean is that the concern with market dominance or expansion blocks more detailed and

important questions of how to build fairer markets. I understand that saying “to build fairer markets” sounds good. The challenge is how to do it. But that’s another agenda. My agenda is to dispute simplistic causal assumptions. One might feel good when saying that money is awful, that markets oppress. You can easily say that, but neither markets nor money are going anywhere. We need to understand how they work, when are markets and money destructive but when do they enhance welfare and solidarity. To think like that, at least, opens up your mind to start considering those options. I have a very interesting quote, from a Brazilian economist, who is actually very critical of the system, but, who said something very similar. This is the theoretical step. Then, the next step is, of course, what many people are trying to do, but the direction is different.

JO: And, in that sense, gender...

VZ: Exactly. The purpose of changing direction goes beyond gender, but, within my work, what I can clearly see, and that has made me closer to more practical things, is the gender issue and, above all, the issue of paying for care. I’ve had had many conversations about that with, above all, experts in law, most of them feminist scholars, who are trying to reform laws so care can be better recognized — not only in divorce cases, but also in labor cases; and not only for women, but also for men. It applies to anyone involved in care work, anyone who for instance has to take a break from work for four days because one of their parents or kids is ill, and is fired afterwards. What is interesting is that *The Purchase of Intimacy* has become relevant, especially to female experts, but some male experts have also written about this, taking steps through legal instruments, not political ones, to influence real social changes, and not only in theory.

JO: In that sense, your work does contribute to a more public discussion...

VZ: That’s what I was going to tell you. The most intelligent review I have read about the *Purchase of Intimacy* was published by a law professor from Maryland in *Law & Social Inquiry*. She shows how the theoretical framework can be applied to the issue of markets for genetic materials. After reading the review, I started to better understand some parts of my own book. Have you realized that sometimes that happens with our one’s work?

JO: Well, those were my questions. Thank you very much Viviana.

VZ: Thank you.

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