

Times of Sociology. Eviatar Zerubavel in Conversation with Lorenzo Sabetta

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Eviatar Zerubavel†

Published: August 28, 2019

Abstract

This interview offers a historical reconstruction of Eviatar Zerubavel's work, from his pioneering studies of time to his not-yet-published analysis of "concept-driven sociology," running the gamut of Zerubavel's career and embracing a period of more than forty years of sociological research. The interview encompasses several major topics: the beginnings of Zerubavel's own intellectual path and his move from Israel to the United States; the nuts and bolts of sociology of time and cognitive sociology; the underlying theoretical framework of a transcontextual and comparative mode of social inquiry; an in-depth analysis of the last books which Zerubavel has devoted to the study of phenomena such as backgroundness and taken-for-grantedness; the range of his academic and intellectual relationships (especially the one with his mentor Goffman, but also his rapport with Peter Berger, Lewis Coser, Renée Fox, and Murray Davis, among others); the polymorphic connection between sociological theory and politics; the development of the so-called "Rutgers School of Sociology"; the issue of "public sociology"; the future of sociology and academic research.

Keywords: Social Theorizing; Taken-for-grantedness; Sociotemporal Order; Erving Goffman; The Social Construction of What?; Rutgers School; Concept-Driven Sociology.

Acknowledgements

The interviewer would like to thank Rachel and Wayne Brekhus, Enzo Campelli, Antonio Fasanella, Carmelo Lombardo, Christena Nippert-Eng, Viviana Zelizer for their kind and precious help.

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Introduction

One of the most intriguing characteristics of Eviatar Zerubavel's work is its boundary-crossing nature: it runs through two continents and spans the last four decades, spreading across a number of substantive themes (time, memory, cognition, classification, identity, denial, human geography, semiotics) and merging together several sociological traditions (as a heterodox follower of Simmel, Durkheim, Schutz, Goffman, and Berger). The multilayered result has been an original culturalist cognitive approach that digs into "the sociomental conventions by which we perceive, attend to, and disattend to features of social reality, classify and categorize the world, create meaning, construct identity, remember events and comprehend time" (Brekhus, 2007, p. 448). For Zerubavel, sociology is an engaged and largely viable analytical competency rather than a monolithic understanding of society and sociology, a theoretical vantage point which is not constrained to a specific field of inquiry. That being said, however, Zerubavel's approach is not only still strongly tied to certain specific fields of sociological inquiry, but it has also virtually founded at least one of them, i.e. the sociology of time, an area of study which was previously more based on the genius of personal insights than on systematic empirical research.

Anyway, it is not hard at all to identify a set of meta-level pillars that constitute the underpinnings of Zerubavelian sociology — even though the author needs no introduction, it still seems useful to summarize them in a schematic overview:

- a firm commitment to the comparative method, characterized by the quest for similarities among *prima facie* dissimilar phenomena, emphasizing formal and abstract properties of social facts instead of their specific manifestations. In a Simmelian manner, the "social geometry" (Zerubavel, 2007, p. 132) is indifferent to singularities and aims to transcend idiographic details, trying instead to reach the highest level of generality possible. As it has been noted, establishing connections between apparently unrelated things, "Zerubavel links the Berlin Wall, animal rights, Marxism, Escher's art, religious purification rituals, knock-knock jokes, and the Dewey Decimal System" (Kearl, 1992, p. 698);
- a constant focus on those aspects of social reality which are neither absolute nor postulational, yet not private and chaotic either, that is, aspects that are "not so different as to be utterly idiosyncratic, yet at the same time also not so similar as to be absolutely universal" (Zerubavel, 1997, p. 11). Remaining equally distant (and distinct) from both the subjective world of the individual and the objective world of nature and logic, Zerubavel's sociology is always about delving into the realm of intersubjectivity and its multiform incarnations: communities, norms, styles, traditions, socialization, conventions, culture. In this sense, it is clearly possible to talk about "Zerubavel's long-term project to understand human cognition through its integration in cultural contexts" (Ben-Yehuda, 2007, p. 1246);
- a dereifying mode of inquiry that carefully applies the sociological perspective to a number of elements so pervasively widespread and deeply embedded in our culture to appear almost inevitable. Time, of course (and the set of its corollaries: calendars, clocks, schedules, the week, etc.), but also thinking and cognition, perception and expectation — "the social gates of consciousness" (Zerubavel, 1997, p. 35) —, arriving eventually at the idea of a social structure of irrelevance, backgroundness and taken-for-grantedness, which are the basis of any social constructionist theses (see Zerubavel, 2015 and 2018);
- as a result, always aiming to "demonstrate where nature ends and social convention begins" (Zerubavel, 1981, p. 4) and unmask the prominence of certain social forces that have shaped what seems unshaped or uncaused, this approach has a strong inclination for establishing various groups of new social facts, therefore devising well-suited new (sensitizing) concepts: "sociotemporal order," "quantum mental leaps," "mental discoveries," "islands of meaning," "conspiracies of silence," "semiotic asymmetries" — a toolbox of metaphorical crowbars indispensable for seeing sociologically certain hidden (/not immediately apparent) dimensions, otherwise overlooked;
- a particular emphasis on the absence, the unsaid, the unnoticed and the unmarked. The accent is on the proverbial "dark side of the moon": to remember implies to forget, perceiving involves

neglecting, making distinction means leaving something indeterminate, discussing certain things implies being silent about others, underlining and stressing entails taking for granted. As Simmel noted: “If human sociation is conditioned by the capacity to speak, it is shaped by the capacity to be silent. (...) We rarely realize how necessary this capacity for silence is in the development of any regulated interaction; we rather take it for granted” (Simmel, 1950, p. 349). Talking about not talking and noticing the absence require to “‘see’ and ‘hear’ the conventionally invisible and inaudible” (Zerubavel, 2018, p. 9) and call for “an open discussion of the very phenomenon of undiscussability” (Zerubavel, 2006, p. 16), therefore highlighting “social negative spaces” through figure-ground reversals;

- a consistent attempt to prioritize the role of theory in the making of social research. The idea is that techniques and statistics cannot run (or even begin to) without an appropriate theoretical foundation and that sociology should necessarily be driven by a theoretical input: theory is viewed as a prerequisite, considered as a must. Thematically and semantically driven, every Zerubavel book reveals his willingness to make the role of theory essential, necessary to every step of the inquiry, as the only way to trigger the “mental process of *abstraction* that allows social pattern analysts to focus on, and thereby uncover, generic pattern” (Zerubavel, 2007, p. 140).

There are elements, of course, quite resistant to any schematizations. What can be interesting about the sociology of Zerubavel is also his very elusiveness to categorizations as such (not qualitative nor quantitative, not relativist nor positivist, not perfectly European nor exclusively American, and so on). Or one can be attracted just to Zerubavel’s attitude of a “sophisticated sleuth,” a stance indispensable for discerning those elements which are “in full view, yet (...) unnoticed by almost everyone” (Melbin, 1983, p. 1338). A *sociologists’ sociologist*, as one is tempted to say, particularly interesting from an analytical and theoretical point of view, even though his skill as a “tour guide” (the definition is from Viviana Zelizer), able to show countless aspects of social reality, makes him pleasantly readable by anyone.

Moreover, an additional feature of interest in Zerubavel’s scientific path is that it intersects with the broader path of contemporary sociology and its recent history. Being a “marginal classic,” neither mainstream nor niche, the peculiar sociological approach of Eviatar Zerubavel is even more telling about what contemporary sociology is, what it has been, and what it might have been. Thus, “the challenge is to connect Zerubavel’s work to what most of the rest of us do. Again and again the reader is reminded of Simmel, who was *sui generis* and yet was quintessentially a sociologist” (Katz, 2016, p. 673).

The following text is the transcription of a video call interview made on 16th August 2018, revised and approved by Zerubavel himself.

16 August 2018

1 First Steps: From Israel to the US, Goffman’s Mentorship, and the Standpoint of a Simmelian Stranger

Lorenzo Sabetta (LS): Let’s begin with your education: how did you come to sociology? Were there, in retrospect, any sociological factors that might account for your earliest career choices?

Eviatar Zerubavel (EZ): It’s actually rather random that I ended up in sociology. When I was very young, less than seventeen, I had one more year before the military service (compulsory in Israel), so I took a year of political science and sociology — sociology was actually at a department which was conjoined with anthropology, at Tel Aviv University. Three years later, after I finished my military service,

I just continued on automatic pilot. It was only during my last year, indeed my very last semester in college, when I read Mannheim's *Ideology and Utopia* (it was required for a course in the sociology of intellectuals) that I was really blown away by the fact that there can be sociological ways of studying thinking. I was very interested in the psychology of thinking, but it never occurred to me that you can look at it sociologically as well. Right after, I read also *The Social Construction of Reality* (I think the sociological book that influenced me the most) and at that point I didn't need any further persuasion to go into sociology.

Then, I discovered Goffman, and that sent me into graduate school at the University of Pennsylvania to study with him. But it's actually the two books that I just mentioned that clicked it: I don't know if without having read them I would have continued in sociology. I mean, I was already fascinated by the cognitive dimension of the human existence (social psychology and perception, for example) and by sociolinguistics. And the work of Benjamin Lee Whorf was the first academic work I discovered on my own, rather than as a required course reading.

LS: What year are we talking about here?

EZ: This was 1971, when it was clear to me that I wanted to enroll in the Ph.D. program at the University of Pennsylvania, where I arrived in 1972. And when I came there, as a matter of fact, what attracted me was not in the sociology department, since it was a department with strengths in demography and criminology. Instead, I was attracted by three specific individuals, three figures: William Labov (in the Department of linguistics), Dell Hymes (in the Department of folklore), and Erving Goffman (in the Department of anthropology). So, I ended up taking courses with all of them, but it was the encounter with Goffman the most fruitful from an intellectual point of view.

LS: I don't want to linger too much on your relationship with Goffman since your 2008 interview with Dmitri Shalin¹ is all about that rapport, but if you'd like to add something more, please.

EZ: Well, I came from Israel to Philadelphia in order to study with him, that was the main reason. Again, I wanted to also study with Labov and Hymes, but Goffman was my primary motivation. Ironically, I had to write a petition to enter his course because he was officially in anthropology (he didn't even have an office at the sociology department: his room was in the museum). He did not accept students from sociology, except if they convinced him that they should study with him: almost nobody made it, not to mention writing a dissertation under him. He would announce in his first class that he was going to accept automatically every student from anthropology, from ethology, from folklore, from communication, from linguistics. All the others had to petition, so did I, and it took a while to be accepted. I mean, it wasn't the warmest welcome, and it went on like that throughout. I was extremely attracted to him intellectually, but he wasn't kind to me either personally or academically, in the sense that he tried to dissuade me from studying what I really wanted to study (that is, time), but I stuck to it.

Broadly speaking, I would say that substantively, basing on my earliest works, you would never know that I even studied with Goffman, because I soon started developing my passion for the sociology of time, which he wasn't interested in and indeed tried to talk me out of it. Instead, methodologically (and not in the superficial sense of data, statistics, etc.) I learned to look at the world from the standpoint of Goffman. He had a unique way of looking, an ability to observe what falls in between the things that you see, establishing patterns that can't be reduced into substantive facts. That's what I learned merely from being around him. He was the co-advisor of my doctoral dissertation, but I was inspired especially by one of the courses that I took with him; a class of 15 graduate students, and the whole course was basically just watching slides (many of which he later used in *Gender Advertisements*), analyzing pictures of 2–3 persons interacting with each other. It was unbelievable — you think at a certain point “What more is there to see?” and then he would chime in and start saying what he visualizes there. It was so influential, just seeing how he looks at things.

This was 1972–1973, when he was doing the touch-ups for *Frame Analysis*; I didn't know he was working on it, but he kept using those analytical concepts then employed in that book. I was mesmerized by that. Anyway, I can say that my work on time was influenced “by him despite him,” in particular for looking at social reality the way I learned from him. Only later, in the 1990s, as I deepened my

1. See Shalin (2008).

engagement with cognitive sociology, I connected much more also with the substance of Goffman's works, especially *Frame Analysis* and *Behavior in Public Places*.

LS: You have been working for most of your life in a country (on a continent) other than your own. How important was that for you? Have you experienced the pros and cons of the ideal-typical Simmelian stranger?

EZ: Absolutely, and it has explicitly come full circle in my latest book on taken-for-grantedness, because like a Simmelian stranger I just couldn't take things for granted! It has been very subtle, though, because Israel and USA are not that different culturally as when you contrast the United States with, say, Mongolia or Sudan. So, the first few months here I thought "This is pretty familiar, after all." The nuanced differences started coming up later, and not being a cultural insider was quite relevant precisely in terms of the impossibility of taking social reality for granted: on balance, a side benefit of being a foreigner.

As far as the cons are concerned, instead, they have been mostly related to language. It took me a long time to develop proficiency in English, and 46 years later sometimes I'm still not altogether proficient in everyday English, especially because I speak Hebrew at home with my family. Even this one, though, is a con only in the short run and, ultimately, is a long-term pro, because I'm sensitive to shades of meaning and subtleties of language in a manner that's much harder for many native speakers. I'll give you an example: in *Taken for Granted*, I discussed the term "white trash"; while Americans think they are saying something about the noun, I conceive this label as saying something about the adjective (Zerubavel, 2018, p. 3). It's tricky, the sense depends on whether you put the emphasis on the noun or on the adjective. The fact that English is my second language allows me to not take these commonplaces as a given.

I mean, you have to learn how to turn cons into pros. After all, it's the situation of being a Simmelian stranger: you are not an insider in either culture. I've been living here in the US for 46 years, but I'm not a native-born American; I've been living outside of Israel for 46 years, so I'm not *fully* Israeli anymore. Intellectually, it gives you certain advantages; existentially, it can be difficult at times, since you don't have the same sense of belongingness that nonimmigrants have.

LS: Is it therefore about making sacrifices, enduring existential pain and emotional hardship in order to yield a richer intellectual output?

EZ: Yes, that may be true, even though I'm not sure if it's pain as much as loss.

2 What Is Sociology All About? Between Insiderism and Outsiderism, Subjectivity and the Objectivity

LS: I would like to expand more on the theme of self-interpretation, since virtually all your works open with straightforward elucidations of the interplay between your sociological analysis and your own life experiences. You wrote: "Unlike many sociologists I know, I happen to regard the fact that I study human beings rather than stars, rocks, bacteria, or fish not as an inherent obstacle, but, rather, as one of the true fascinations of being a sociologist. Doing sociology has always implied further harmony between my professional life and my personal life" (Zerubavel, 1981, p. XVII). I am aware that right now there is a lot of hype surrounding this concept and it's easy to jump on the bandwagon, but would you say something about what reflexivity means to you?

EZ: To tell you the truth, I associate it mostly with Weber's idea of *verstehen*. There is a certain gain that you have as a sociologist: you can understand social reality from within. Being a human being, even if I study someone from a very different culture, you know, there's still the humanness in both of us and I can grasp how this person thinks in a way that, to me, is much more credible than my ability to comprehend a dog or a skunk. The flip side of that, which is what you can see — as is well-known in autoethnography — is the danger of losing the distance. You need some distance from the object of your analysis. Anthropologists tried to highlight it in terms of the tension between so-called emic and

etic perspectives; the risk is that you may end up attributing to your subjects illusory things that are not really there, just because you bring them from your own culture.

At the same time, studying the culture you're living in, what is needed is to take a step back and try to have a look from a distance. It's quite clear right from the beginning in my work on time, especially in *The Seven Day Circle* (Zerubavel, 1985), when I identified the seven-day week as a certain rhythm that seemed to me so pervasive, so ubiquitous in our daily life, in my daily life: I knew it from within, but I couldn't assume that I apprehended it necessarily in the same way other people did. I surmise that this tension "insider vs. outsider" plays a key role here.

LS: The efforts to identify and investigate those aspects of social reality which are neither axiomatic nor universal, yet not entirely personal and subjective either, is perhaps the most recurring leitmotif in your sociology. What are the roots of your lifelong commitment to a «supra-personal yet nevertheless sub-universal» (Zerubavel, 1997, p. 21) level of analysis? Is this space between the quirkily idiosyncratic and the naturally lawful the authentic domain of social theory, that is, of a truly "sociological sociology"?

EZ: You hit it on the nail. I do believe that theoretically, as you said, it is the most recurring leitmotif in my sociology, even though it took me almost 20 years (until Zerubavel, 1997) to explicitly articulate this point. It didn't come right away. It has been, actually, the influence of Émile Durkheim, on the one hand, and Sorokin and Berger and Luckmann on the other hand. The Durkheimian part is evident: if I had to say what's the first sociological text one should read, I would recommend the chapter from *The Rules of Sociological Method* titled "What is a social fact?" (Durkheim, 1982, pp. 50–59). To me, it's a brilliant and articulate statement on what sociology is all about, unambiguously pointing out that sociology ought to be different from psychology (by the way, at his time psychology meant the individual; today it means the human).

So, firstly, you have to examine norms, you have to talk about traditions. When I started my research on time, I realized that there was the whole Bergsonian perspective that's highly personalistic, highly subjective (my sense of duration is not like yours, etc.). On the contrary, in Schutzian terms, my point was not about subjective temporal orientations, but about intersubjective temporal orientations — my article on the standardization of time is where this frame of reference becomes the clearest.² When I look at my watch and I see what time it is now, 11:27 AM is not a personal thing, since if you look at your watch, you'll see the same. However, and this is the Sorokin and Berger and Luckmann part, 11:27 AM is not an absolute time. It's something we share, but it's not objective, because objective would be the natural or the logical, and — in the case of time — the physical.

Thus, it was very significant for me trying to identify temporal behaviors that were not personal, but collective, and at the same time following social conventions and traditions rather than falling into the laws of nature. This is why I really think that the best characteristic of the work behind *The Seven Day Circle* was choosing the very research topic: not personal and so omnipresent but not natural.

After I did it in my work on time, I continued doing it when I studied thinking. Most remarkably, when I contrasted "cognitive individualism" with "cognitive universalism,"³ highlighting how the divergence is not between subjectivity and objectivity, but between both of them, on the one hand, and intersubjectivity on the other. Psychology nowadays is moving more and more into cognitive science, but usually occupies both the positions of individualism and universalism. It's only sociology and social psychology that deal with what lies in between. Speaking of which, I define the social as the whole range that starts from an individual plus 1 (or a single person in a social context) and goes up to humankind minus 1.

3 Zerubavelian Sociology as an Analytic Literacy: Transcontextuality, Abstraction, and the Dichotomy Substance/Form

2. See Zerubavel (1982a).

3. See Zerubavel (1997, pp. 1–22).

LS: Still on the topic of sociological metatheory, there is another feature of your approach I wish to dwell on. As has been pointed out, your theoretical method is a broadly applicable perspective, «translatable across nearly any subfield of sociological inquiry» (Brekhus, 2007, p. 449). You yourself outlined the main points of this peculiar mode of inquiry: a theme-driven rather than a data-driven style, the search for similarities among *prima facie* dissimilar phenomena, a commitment to the comparative method, the emphasis on formal properties instead of their specific manifestations. Now, the question is, doesn't it seem like this type of approach is declining and losing momentum? Is it a sort of knowledge that can be reasonably expected only from classical sociologists or big names? How to reinvigorate and strengthen the kind of sociological imagination that produces works like “schedules and calendars in social life” rather than “schedules and calendars in Benedictine monasteries”? I'm asking also because I know your next book is going to revolve around this issue, i.e. what you have called “general theory.”

EZ: One of the events that made me aware, most poignantly, of this sort of analytical competency behind my approach was when Wayne Brekhus (when he was studying with me) told me that my “Cognitive Sociology” class should be considered a literacy course, for it wasn't really a course about cognition and the predominant emphasis was on a metalevel dimension that cut across different subfields. I guess he was right. When I completed my dissertation, my other co-advisor, Renée Fox, asked me “Where's the methodological chapter?” and I was like “What am I supposed to write there? Do you want a chronicle of how I spent my time doing fieldwork in the hospital?”. She replied, “Not at all, I'm referring to how you observed something unobservable like time by doing field research in a hospital.” Eventually, I didn't include such a chapter, it was a cop-out. But I knew that I chickened out and then, less than a year later, I presented a paper at the 1977 Eastern Sociological Society meeting,⁴ partly based on the work of Everett Hughes (technically my grand-mentor, since he was Goffman's mentor⁵) with him in the audience. I tried to explain how a study *in* a hospital is not necessarily a study *of* the hospital, since I had realized that in *Patterns of Time in Hospital Life* I couldn't have convinced anyone that the book was about time and not hospitals, because all my data were situated in that context. This led me to the comparative method.

Now, sociological comparative method, traditionally, goes back to Weber and aims to underline variations, differences. Instead, I appreciate the comparative method for the opposite reason, because I want to focus the attention on similarities, drawing examples selected from tons of different substantive contexts. Transcontextuality, to me, means to reason analogically, looking at things that while seemingly disparate on the surface, deep down can be regarded as similar to each other. It's the metaphor of superficial vs. deep, surfaces vs. essences (it comes very nicely in Hofstadter and Sander, 2013). I mean, you *can* compare apples and oranges, for both are fruits. My point here, and I think it was also the main argument of my book on classification,⁶ is that similarity and dissimilarity, which are the bases of the act of classifying, are not absolute qualities: the question is what you emphasize, and not that two things are inherently similar to or dissimilar from one another.⁷

Moving on, you asked if this is something that can be expected only from big names. John Levi Martin used to give me precisely this critique, adding that it's unfair to expect it from students. From where I sit, this is not the case. Instead, I think it's something that can be cultivated. So far, I've chaired 20 doctoral dissertations and many of them did adopt this approach. Besides, I don't know if this mode of sociological inquiry is losing momentum. To be honest, I don't believe in these statements, I'm not really sure “where the field is going.” Look: when I used Simmel's ideas during the preparation for my comprehensive doctoral exam in 1974, I was told that Simmel was *passé*, and that I was attaching myself

4. Then published as an article: see Zerubavel (1980).

5. In this regard, see Zerubavel (2011, pp. 120–121), on “quasi-intergenerational chains of mentors” and the use of genealogical diagrams to portray the flow of intellectual influence.

6. The reference is to Zerubavel (1991).

7. A recent example of “the social construction of difference and similarity” (Zerubavel, 1996a, p. 426) is provided by Asia Friedman (2013), with specific regards to human bodies and their sex sameness (to which social actors are mostly inattentive, almost blind) and sex differences (which are generally stressed, acutely noted, and accurately recorded). In this light, “the many physical similarities between the sexes that are there, ready to be acknowledged, are normally relegated to the background of our perceptions. (...) When norms of disattention become reified, sex differences begin to seem as though they are *actually* more salient than sex similarities, when they are only more *socially* salient” (Friedman, 2013, p. 14).

to someone dead in sociology; since then, Simmel came back more widely studied than ever.

In this sense, I don't like concepts such as "field," "literature": these are just essentializing expressions, given the multi-paradigmatic nature of sociology. If you take any of my books and open any page on the bibliographical references, you'll find people who have nothing to do with one another substantively, who have probably never appeared in a bibliography together, but they do appear in mine. I feel very strongly about eclecticism and intellectual pluralism, I find them liberating.

LS: Speaking of eclecticism, transcontextuality, degrees of abstraction, and formal approaches to sociological reasoning, it's really staggering how many topics you have dealt with, while maintaining a consistent style and strategy. How has your "sociological nose" — as Peter Berger (1992, p. 12) called it — for what's relevant stayed the same and how has it changed over your career? And since your works are at the same time both thematically heterogeneous and theoretically coherent,⁸ what do you see as the deepest threads that run through and connect them?

EZ: We are back to the dichotomy substance/form. Substantively, there is a big difference between what I did in the 1970s and early 1980s working on time and what I have done since then studying cognition. But formally, analytically, those phases are fairly close to one another. In the book on "generally speaking" that I'm writing right now,⁹ I insist a lot on the importance of Herbert Blumer's idea of "sensitizing concepts" (1954, p. 8). It's not an unsung theorization, it's celebrated, but not enough. Sensitizing concepts are vaguely defined concepts, but this is their strength, because they are like magnets, you put them in your mind and they keep attracting pertinently related data.

By the way, my notion of data is not that conventional. You know, my first research project on time was based on fieldwork in a hospital and, of course, nobody had problems with that. It was the same when I wrote later on historical stuff (like the calendar of the French Revolution), since people said: "Well, there are no primary sources, but secondary sources are fine: he's dealing with historical data." But when I wrote *The Fine Line* (1991), *Time Maps* (2003), *The Elephant in the Room* (2006) or *Ancestors and Relatives* (2011) my data were chosen from everywhere, and in doing that I was influenced by Goffman. He did fieldwork for his dissertation in the Shetland Islands north of Scotland, but he didn't deliver *The Presentation of Self in the Shetland Islands*. One of the things he did, in order to make it more general, was bringing a lot of data from fiction: a passage from Henry James acquired the same status as the field notes gathered during the ethnography. It must be noted, though, that I never heard from Goffman that this was something praiseworthy, he rather recommended that I should study only observable social facts, "in the flesh."

The Fine Line was my first book entirely based on examples that I saw around me and I read about, a book not specifically situated in a particular substantive context. It was kind of risky. At that time, I felt very defensive when other scholars attacked me methodologically. It took me several books and a couple of decades to start feeling comfortable with it. People used to say "You're using just your examples, you're doing cherry picking": ok, let's talk about the art of picking cherries, how to choose proper examples. I don't think it's not systematic or accurate, it can be indeed super-rigorous. When I worked on *The Fine Line*, I worked six years exclusively on that, gathering information about distinctions and boundaries everywhere I could spot them. I was very focused, and the art of focusing is exactly the art of picking cherries.

4 The Hidden and the Unmarked

LS: You always had a penchant for analyzing "those ubiquitous aspects of everyday life that are normally taken for granted and therefore overlooked" (Zerubavel, 1985, p. XIII) — it had been so since your pioneering investigations of that social aspect ubiquitous-and-overlooked par excellence, i.e. time. Although Goffman had weirdly warned you in this respect ("you need to study an 'animal,' something

8. With regard to the consistent continuity of Zerubavel's work, it has been observed — for example — that "*The Fine Line* does for boundaries what *Hidden Rhythms* did for time: it makes the invisible more visible" (Spain, 1993, p. 1079).

9. Partially based on a previous article: see Zerubavel (2007).

you can watch, and you cannot watch time”¹⁰), the very term “hidden” appears in the titles of two of your books. Furthermore, your last field of research explicitly explores the seeming paradox of the (sociological) relevance of the (socially) irrelevant. What are the reasons for such a persistent intellectual fascination? Where does it come from?

EZ: Well, there are two ways to answer this, how did this idea come in my own life and how did it come in my academic path. As you rightly said, the odd thing was that Goffman, my inspirer, tried to dissuade me from the analysis of what’s socially overlooked and imperceptible. I came up in my second year in graduate school with a possible dissertation project about punctuality, I prepared the whole explanation of the research and how to design it, but he barely listened and immediately interrupted me: “Punctuality is about time, you can’t study time, you need an ‘animal,’ something that you can actually observe” (by the way, that zoological reference was not random since he was peculiarly open to ethology back then). I asked him sarcastically “Do you mean an animal like frame, encounter or stigma?” and he told me that it wasn’t the way to do it. At the time, I thought he was kind of modest, now I see he was very arrogant, because he did opt for that approach and he knew perfectly well he was excellent at that. And that was precisely what inspired me, the prospect of investigating aspects which have nothing to do with the material structure of social situations, but only with their cognitive and nonphysical scaffolding.

However, my attraction towards the concept of taken-for-grantedness was also influenced by reading Harold Garfinkel, and even though the concept of taken-for-grantedness was brought into sociology by Schutz, I got to it first from Garfinkel, who flipped the original idea. In fact, Schutz was interested in how the intersubjective order is established and routinized, while Garfinkel tried to un-routinize it methodologically — I was very impressed by ethnomethodology.

Anyway, what you don’t know is that when I was a child, I wanted to be an archeologist, so I guess that digging for the hidden and the unrevealed was already there. Besides, my wife, Yael Zerubavel, is a well-known student of cultural memory and her first book was about uncovering archeologically the hidden roots of ancient Hebrewness.¹¹ Speaking of that, let me say a word about the “hidden.” Things can be different in terms of what appears and congruous in terms of what does not appear, and Jacob Bronowski considered the quest for the hidden likeness among elements that are seemingly unlike as the essence of scientific discovery.¹² This is also what Arthur Koestler described as “bisociation,”¹³ a process through which two habitually separated realms are put together: it’s what happens very often in humor, but I feel it should be done systematically in sociology as well, it should be articulated as a full-fledged research method.

LS: I’m going to be still more specific about your last book on the taken for granted. Non-events, nameless cultural elements, activities performed in such a way as to disregard the fact that something is being performed, all of this seem to be the stuff the vast majority of social reality is made of. Yet, despite this ontological prevalence, they are background-like, less salient and unmarked. Or rather, as you pointed out, unmarkedness is precisely a function of statistical/experiential prominence and social dominance.¹⁴ Isn’t that a crucial point, that we have more labels and concepts for what doesn’t really matter to us, having — at the same time — less interest in what runs deepest with us?

EZ: Let me start by saying that I’m intellectually indebted to my former student Wayne Brekhus on this matter, because he has beautifully shown on several occasions why the mundane needs to be studied

10. Quoted in Shalin (2008, p. XX).

11. See Zerubavel (1995).

12. Bronowski wrote: “I found the act of creation to lie in the discovery of a hidden likeness. The scientist or the artist takes two facts or experiences which we separate, he finds in them a likeness which had not been seen before: and he creates a unity by showing the likeness (...) All science is the search for unity in hidden likenesses” (1956, pp. 40–41).

13. Koestler coined the term *bisociation* to account for “the perceiving of a situation or idea, L, in two self-consistent but habitually incompatible frames of reference, M₁ and M₂ (...) While this unusual situation lasts, L is not merely linked to one associative context, but bisociated with two” (1964, p. 35).

14. See Zerubavel (2018, pp. 32–59). Since the tendency is to mark and emphasize what is less frequently encountered, “it is the statistically aberrant that usually draws our semiotic attention. A widely used term implies that, perhaps counterintuitively, the phenomenon it denotes is culturally atypical” (Zerubavel, 2018, p. 19).

and considered central in social theory.¹⁵ In the beginning, *Taken for Granted* was conceived as being together with *Hidden in Plain Sight* and only later I decided to split the project into two separate books. The initial aim was to hold together three theoretical perspectives which are quite similar to one another: the phenomenological sociological tradition coming from Schutz (centered on taken-for-grantedness); the structural linguistic and semiotic theory developed by Roman Jakobson (which is about unmarkedness); and the Gestalt psychological approach on the figure/ground relationship (that revolves around the concept of backgroundness).

I soon realized that it was going to be an artificial and awkward synthesis, and moreover I started concentrating specifically on the notion of background as a metaphor for the irrelevant, gravitating towards the issue of attention/inattention. So, I tackled firstly the topic of the background and how people socially construct irrelevance, and only in 2014 did I feel ready to write *Taken for granted*, which is more about unmarkedness. I tried to underline the fact that unmarked phenomena are culturally redundant and because of that they are semiotically superfluous (you can find disabled parking spots, not able-bodied ones; marked bike lanes, not explicitly designated car lanes; vegan menus rather than omnivore menus). Therefore, this is captured lexically, in our vocabulary, since we have concepts and terms only for those aspects of social reality which are marked, while the unmarked ones can “go without saying.” I used the semiotics’ perspective for stressing the connection between cultural redundancy and linguistic superfluity. We have an expression such as “openly gay,” but its nominally equivalent counterpart “openly straight” is almost nonexistent. The supposedly generic “normality” is often manifested in namelessness, and normality and nameability are inversely proportional. By doing that, unmarked identities are normalized while marked identities are abnormalized. There is a symbiotic relationship between these twin processes.

LS: It seems almost as if taken-for-granted information is transmitted precisely by not transmitting information at all: it seems useless to do so since taken-for-grantedness can remain at an implicit level (what is “needless to say”).

EZ: Absolutely, not communicating is communicating here. That’s the asymmetry. There is, however, the possibility of what I called semiotic subversions.¹⁶ Even though unmarkedness implies a degree of cultural invisibility and anonymity (and its socio-political dominance depends on that), it’s still feasible to foreground the hitherto taken for granted, for example giving it a name — introducing the term “cisgender” and naming an identity who was nameless before, means putting the phenomena of transness and non-transness on an equal semiotic footing.

5 How to Study Taken-for-granted Realities? Listening to the Sound of Silence

LS: Among the preconditions for the development of social constructionist theses about a specific X, Ian Hacking (1999, p. 12) considered as a sine qua non that “in the present state of affairs, X is taken for granted; X appears to be inevitable.” Now, the realm of take-for-grantedness pertains to what is taken as a given by definition, therefore the most urgent and pressing to unpack (exactly because it’s not perceived as urgent or pressing at all). But how to deal with the fact that “we lack positive evidence for our lack of attention”¹⁷? The primary characteristic of taken-for-granted knowledge is that «it is never articulated as a specific knowledge»,¹⁸ under the assumption that “objects *are* something rather than *are seen* as something”¹⁹: what are the implications, especially methodologically, of this?

15. See Brekhus (1998 & 2015).

16. See Zerubavel (2018, pp. 60–91).

17. Chabris & Simons (2009, p. 38).

18. Schutz & Luckmann (1973, p. 104).

19. Rogers (1981, p. 140).

EZ: First of all, I have to tell you that I heard several years ago Peter Berger speaking vehemently against being called a “social constructionist.” Therefore, if *he* didn’t want to be associated with that, I really don’t know how I should feel. I’m anti-essentialist, but not relativist, I consider myself “relationist” in the Mannheimian sense.²⁰ The concept of social construction, like any other concept, has been cheapened through overuse, but it’s a useful reminder that normality and hegemony are just products rather than something out there, inherently valid.

Anyway, to answer your question, I think Garfinkel is the pioneer student of absence in sociology. As Jamie Mullaney has demonstrated, sociologists can surely see not-doings, e.g. analyzing certain identities which are based on *not* doing something.²¹ I’m a great believer that absence can be studied, that is necessary to look not only at what is going on, but also at what is *not* going on — why is a person not saying something or why is he refraining from acting? How do you study silence, background realities, and unmarked facts? Indirectly, like in Garfinkel’s breaching experiments.

I began working on this stuff since *Hidden Rhythms*, whose first chapter is about the cognitive implications of temporal regularities. For example, what happens when something happens at the wrong time or doesn’t happen at the right time.²² It was in this sense that I started looking at worries (something should be there and it’s not) or surprises (something should not be there and instead is). Even back in my dissertation, I focused a lot on the behavior of doctors and nurses who were perplexed and puzzled when they saw other staff members on the job in a different moment than their habitual coverage time slots.²³ Their surprised mode of behaving taught me that there were a right and a wrong time in the hospital life. You have to teach yourself to look obliquely at absence, looking at failures of presence/wrong time, and through that learning about presence/right time.

By the same token, if there is plenty of protest and complaint when a black actress is cast in a certain role, this suggests that when a character’s racial identity is not specified in a play or a script, white actors are far more likely than non-white ones to be cast in that role. And although there can be a silence about silence, a meta-silence that forbids to talk about the fact that is forbidden to talk, silence itself can be deafening and clearly pregnant: you can hear it through fear, embarrassment or euphemisms. You may wonder why there is an abundance of euphemisms surrounding a specific topic, and so noticing that there is something people are silent about.

To pinpoint and foreground bad Gestalten, failed expectations, mismatches, discrepancies, and asymmetries is the best way for exploring what is taken for granted; I guess the Garfinkelian manner of studying the implicit by violating the explicit is still valid. Actually, I have a forthcoming article titled “Listening to the Sound of Silence: Methodological Reflections on Studying the Unsaid.”

6 Public Sociology and Critical Sociology

LS: What strikes me the most about the study of the background, culturally invisible, aspects of social reality is that it forces sociologists to develop esoteric criteria of relevance and significance — analytical originality becomes a necessity, making it impossible to rely on alien standards of salience (for example, journalistic standards of newsworthiness) or just follow what is popularly trendy and currently

20. See Mannheim (1946, p. 270).

21. See Mullaney (2005).

22. Establishing the existence of certain default expectations regarding the temporal profile of social situations, that chapter aimed to show how the taken-for-grantedness of normal daily life is temporally anchored: “The temporal regularity of our everyday life world is definitely among the major background expectancies which are the basis of the ‘normalcy’ of our social environment. The fairly regular temporal structure of our social life is responsible for the establishment of some solid temporal ground against which the occurrence of certain events and the presence of particular persons and objects pass as normal and unnoticeable” (1981, p. 21).

23. “It is precisely the surprised glances at the clock and such questions as ‘What are you doing here?’ — which are essentially responses to ‘pathological’ situations — that were most helpful to me in discovering the ‘normal’ cognitive order which they presuppose and which is usually taken for granted, namely, the sociotemporal order of the hospital” (Zerubavel, 1979, p. 130).

appealing to the audience. Speaking of which, do you think that the “public sociology” emphasis has gone too far?

EZ: Ever since my doctoral dissertation, I found more challenging and exciting intellectually to observe the everyday and familiar and to illuminate it from a novel analytical perspective.²⁴ I think that Wayne Brekhus’ “Mundane Manifesto”²⁵ presents one of the best approaches to this whole issue: if the ordinary constitutes the vast majority of social interactions, one can’t belittle the study of what’s ordinary, pigeonholing it and considering it exotic.

As far as the notions of popularity and trendiness are concerned, I must admit I have reluctance in accepting their implications. I remember back in the 1970s, when I was working on my dissertation, several colleagues felt compelled to give me “friendly advice” to pick another topic because time seemed to them unfashionable — you know, time!, one of the immortal things in philosophy. And of course it wasn’t à la mode, but only for sociologists and just because sociologists have not addressed the issue of time adequately. It has taken decades for the sociological interest towards time to develop over the years, at a slow pace. Today I see that there’s a greater interest, but this was not the case when I tried to develop a full-fledged sociology of time.

However, what has been called public sociology is basically what is supposed to hold the attention of the audience, it’s a manifestation of the persuasion that sociologists have to be relevant to their public. Now, in my last book on taken-for-grantedness, I eventually get to the “holy trinity” (gender, race, sexuality) that I had deliberately avoided in my past books — the truth is that I found it so disturbing that those were almost the only things that sociology should investigate. Anyway, am I a public sociologist? Am I relevant to the public? I don’t know, over my career I’ve got letters and emails from people who are part of the “public,” people touched and impressed by my work, but I guess that this doesn’t make me a public sociologist in the orthodox sense of the term.

I think the whole question boils down to the fact that sociologists should be interested in “social problems.” Sociologists are trained to point to race, gender, and sexuality. In many sociology programs, Social Problems is a must course. How can you not take a class on race or gender? I mean, these are important topics, but I always tried to speak for (and deal with) those sociological subjects which are not considered popular, trendy or public. After all, Gusfield has demonstrated better than anyone that social problems are what come to be constructed as social problems.²⁶ I think that sometimes the attempt to be “publicly relevant” can be kind of gratuitous; I don’t feel the need to advertise my work as public sociology in order to make it significant. Nevertheless, I always tried to write in a style that could be accessible to non-sociologists, abstaining from using sociologese and being exclusionary to the broader audience. But again, I guess I’m using the attribute “public” in a different sense than Burawoy’s one.

LS: Your last two works are probably the most political you have penned. Which is paradoxical and revealing, considering that they were supposed to be centered on the irrelevant and the unremarkable. Don’t you find it sociologically fascinating, almost compelling?

EZ: I have to disagree. I beg to differ with a lot of my colleagues on what can be regarded as “political.” For example, my 1982 article on calendars and group identity is on the first schism in the Christian Church and the dispute between Rome and the Asian churches²⁷: if this is not political, I don’t know what’s political. It’s not political economy, I’ll grant you that, but it’s still highly political. So is my 1977 essay on the French Republican calendar and the most radical attempt in modern history to challenge the Western standard temporal reference framework — isn’t that utterly political? And also *The Ele-*

24. See Zerubavel (1979, p. XVI).

25. The reference is to Brekhus (2000).

26. See Gusfield (1980).

27. That piece analyzed the introduction of an Easter cycle that would be entirely independent of the Jewish calendar (Easter Sunday and Passover Eve never coincide) as a Church’s attempt to establish its own peculiar identity as distinct from the Synagogue, thus demonstrating the functions of temporal order as a unifier and as a separator: “On the one hand, in accentuating the similitude among group members vis-à-vis others, the calendar helps to solidify in-group sentiments and thus constitutes a powerful basis for mechanical solidarity within the group. At the same time, it also contributes to the establishment of intergroup boundaries that distinguish, as well as separate, group members from ‘outsiders’” (Zerubavel, 1982b, p. 288).

phant in the Room is as political as it could be, although I can't tell you how many audiences I have not been able to convince of this. I remember giving talks on my work on the history and meaning of the week and hearing ardent replies like "What about the politics of all this?". Well, the politics is that both Robespierre and Stalin tried hard to destroy the seven-day week and eventually failed, attesting to the tremendous resilience of tradition in general and of religion in particular²⁸ — it's just that this is not commonly considered legitimate part of the domain of politics.

7 The Issue of Contempocentrism and the Canvas of the Present

LS: Speaking of politics, Mark Fisher recently came out with a book about the idea that "it's easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism."²⁹ One of your latest articles is focused on essentialism and its five pillars: doesn't it seem like one of these, "eternalism" (which you defined as the "fallacy of mistaking the historically specific for the truly eternal"³⁰) is becoming more and more ingrained in the way we look at today's world? Might we be burdened by the same chronocentrism that led the Young Hegelian Arnold Ruge, in 1843, to complain to his friend Karl Marx that he would never see a political upheaval in his lifetime, only 5 years before 1848, "the year of revolution"?

EZ: It's such an interesting question, related to the manner you look at history and time. When you are telling this anecdote about Ruge, you are telling it 175 years after the event itself, with twenty-two hindsight, but back then Ruge himself could not possibly envision 1848. You know, that's the whole phenomenon of trying to anticipate how the present will be seen from the standpoint of the future as a past. I see contempocentrism as analogous to ethnocentrism: you take the culture (or the moment) you're living in as the baseline, the standard against which different cultures (or times) should be compared.³¹ The notion of "always" is the historicized form of essentialism. An example which impressed me is a speech of the second lady Marilyn Quayle (the wife of Vice President Dan Quayle) who, at the 1992 Republican Convention, tried to "remind" people how the US used to be prior to the 1960s and 1970s, before the sexual and gender revolutions, before the Civil Rights movement. She talked as if it had always been like that in the past, but it actually used to be like that only during the 1950s, just between WW2 and the early 1960s, for a very short time. It can be cunning and deceptive, though, because not having been around at the time when something was introduced, people tend to assume that it has always been there.

However, analyzing in retrospect is absolutely legitimate and has no bounds (ex-post can be one month later, one year later, one hundred years later). I'm an epistemic pluralist here. Simmel has this beautiful image of the distance from which you can choose to observe a painting.³² If you want to focus on the brushstroke or the texture you would prefer maybe a few inches; if you rather want to see the composition you would locate yourself several feet away, if you want to assess how the painting fits on the wall of a gallery you would need to go back further. I guess it's the same for studying historical moments — there is no correct, Archimedean point of view about 1843.

LS: But are we today too close to the canvas of the present?

28. See Zerubavel (1985, pp. 27–43).

29. See Fisher (2009, pp. 1–11).

30. Zerubavel (2016, p. 73).

31. "The common 'contempocentric' tendency to mistake currentness for correctness» (Zerubavel, 1997, pp. 28–29) seems to be closely tied to the prejudice that what occurs recently is more high-impact than what went before and to the stubborn idea of an alleged 'uniqueness of the present moment'» (Kracauer, 1969, p. 63).

32. "We obtain different pictures of an object when we see it at a distance of two, or of five, or of ten yards. At each distance, however, the picture is 'correct' in its particular way and only in this way. (...) If the minute detail of a painting that we gain at very close range were injected into a perspective gained at a distance of several yards, this perspective would be utterly confused and falsified. And yet on the basis of a superficial conception, one might assert that the detailed view is 'truer' than the more distant view. But even this detailed perception involves some distance whose lower limit is, in fact, impossible to determine. All we can say is that a view gained at any distance whatever has its own justification. It cannot be replaced or corrected by any other view emerging at another distance" (Simmel, 1950, pp. 7–8).

EZ: You know, we are always near the canvas of the present, but it is important to keep in mind that the present is dreadfully fleeting, it's just a fraction, as soon as we start talking about the present it's already in the past, in the memories. Speaking of which, to me, it's particularly interesting to study how the past has been studied, a point of view which is not so much about the past as it is about the present. It's looking at the looker, just as in Frances Fitzgerald's book about American history textbooks.³³ When you analyze cultural memories the rememberer is often more interesting than the things which are remembered.

8 The Rutgers School of Sociology

LS: There is another facet of your life as a social scientist I would like to touch on in particular. It's difficult to overstate the scientific significance of training and mentoring new students, transmitting knowledge across generations, building Fleckian thought-collectives. In this respect, you did not just socialize an entire cohort of scholars to a distinctive sociological vantage point, but this very group of your former students identify themselves as "Rutgers School sociologists." Did all of this occur without planning, as time goes by, or was something deliberately constructed?

EZ: I have mixed feelings about what you're asking. Part of me wants to say no, this occurred without planning, but the other part would like to affirm that there has been a bit of strategic planning, a sort of groundwork. It has been unplanned in the sense that the very term "Rutgers School" is something introduced by Wayne Brekhus,³⁴ I have never thought of putting it this way. However, there's an element which may be similar to planning. As I said, I've chaired twenty dissertations. Once I moved in 1985 from Columbia to Stony Brook (and three years later to Rutgers), I came to a department that didn't have a "big" name. Students therefore had to publish more before going on the job market. Thus, when I was about to leave Stony Brook, starting with Christena Nippert-Eng, who was working on her dissertation with me, I said "Can we make a deal and not talk about a dissertation, but right from the beginning about a book?", meaning I could help save her the several years when people revise and revise dissertations, and try right away to produce something quite ready to be a book, you know, without the literature review section or the methodology chapter.

That was the first (in the late 1980s) of a lot of projects of the same type, thematically-driven works, not confined to a specific substantive setting. It's 30 years since launching this tradition, and in this respect you can talk of a certain planning. Not planning in terms of a "school," but rather as building scholars' careers. My advice is that of taking chances, but especially having the sense of "the big picture," embarking on projects that are bookable and thinking in long-terms. You know, when I graduated from the University of Pennsylvania, my first appointment was in an applied research job which I was not particularly excited about, but a few years later I was hired as an associate professor at Columbia. The difference was my publications: suddenly, the fact that I came from a certain university was not as significant as the fact that I published in *AJS*, *ASR*, *Social Forces*, and so on. My point is that a career is way more complex than getting one's first job, which can be just a step to something else — of course, if you write excellent stuff. That's exactly what I try to supervise: mostly, how to make decisions about what to write about.

9 Intellectual Relationships, Academic Milieus, and Human Connections

LS: Apropos of masters, pupils, and the way in which past knowledge is selectively transmitted: you have had the chance to be trained by or acquainted with outstanding scholars (Renée Fox, Erving Goffman, Peter Berger among others). What was the intellectual ambience at the time? What sorts of things did you learn as their student that you might not have learned from their writing alone?

33. The reference is to Fitzgerald, 1979.

34. See Brekhus (2007).

EZ: I struck up a real friendship with Peter Berger that goes back to when he wrote a thankful letter to me because I had his son in my course “Symbolic Interactionism and Phenomenological Sociology” at Columbia University, even though at the time I didn’t know he was his son (it’s funny that he had not read his father’s works before my class).

To answer about Goffman, I have to go back to what I’ve said before, about his signature way of looking at the social world. You know, two years after he died, some of us (Goffman’s former students like Sam Heilman, Gary Alan Fine, Sherri Cavan — this last one, the “only one real student” that Goffman once said to ever had) had a session at the ASA annual meeting on what we learned from Goffman. What was amazing was that all of us mentioned the same thing, without preparing it in advance: the fact that we learned how to look, something that we would have never guessed from his writings only. Moreover, he never explicitly taught us anything about analytical gaze, sociological eye and similar stuff. We acquired this skill only by watching him in action: how to look at the most micro-micro-microscopic situations and visualize invisible dimensions which you couldn’t have seen otherwise.

It’s hard to put it into words; I’ll give you an example of how I was shaped as an observer thanks to Goffman. During the fieldwork in the hospital for my dissertation, I noticed one day a nurse come out of the nurses’ station, walk like 30 feet through the main corridor of the unit where there was a clock on the wall; she looked at the time, came back to the station and then sat down. Sounds very trivial, except that she was wearing a watch (this was 1975, when people were still wearing wristwatches), and she did all that journey regardless. Then I started noticing it again also with other residents, walking down the hallway and doing a 180-degree turn of the neck to look at the clock, and they were wearing watches as well. I realized that all of this happened only when they needed to coordinate themselves morally with each other. Arriving late or leaving early were moral offenses, violations of a moral code. And the moral is the social: if I come late, who cares what my watch shows, even if it says I’m early I still came late socially. That is, wall clocks have a social function. To my knowledge, apparently no one else has ever written about that before. I wasn’t the greatest observer, though. I could spend a whole night there without noticing that one patient died, for example. But analytically, I was sensitized to see the distinction between what’s on the clock and what’s on the watch: Goffman may have dissuaded me from studying time, but he modeled my observational style anyway.

However, you didn’t mention three other scholars who I consider extremely important in my development as a sociological theorizer. One person is Kai Erikson. We have a 42-year friendship which started when I was interviewed for a job at Yale, a job that I never got, but I got a friendship with Kai, a very stimulating collegial relationship. He’s seventeen years older than me, so it has always been an intergenerational relationship and because of that it has played a key role in my life’s path; you know, seeing how a senior colleague interacts with junior scholars. I mean, later I learned also to appreciate his work itself: the first chapter of his *Wayward Puritans*³⁵ has been super-important, it clicked it for me to write *The Fine Line*. But what I learned from the books is very different than what I learned from the person, i.e. his intergenerational generosity.

The second person I would mention is Lewis Coser, who I was hired to replace in Stony Brook, but there was a year of overlap. I came from a department, at Columbia, ruled by Robert K. Merton, and I found Lew Coser who was almost the same age as Merton but never behaving in that regal, imperious way. I mean, he was 35 years older than me (that’s almost three academic generations); the generosity he showed to me as a younger colleague was incredible. Again, his sociological works influenced me a lot, but it was the personal “touch” that I adored.

The third person is Murray Davis. When I read his book *Smut: Erotic Reality/Obscene Ideology* I discovered a kindred spirit, someone who was equally influenced by Simmel, Goffman, Mary Douglas, Edmund Leach, that could combine symbolic interactionism with phenomenology, anthropology with the sociology of knowledge. When the journal *Contemporary Sociology* did a special issue on its twenty-fifth anniversary I chose to review *Smut* as the most neglected book of the last decades.³⁶ Then, I met him in person, right after I was denied tenure at Columbia, when I felt the world was collapsing on me. I was very close to leaving academia, filled with revulsion, but eventually, I decided to continue. Instead, Davis

35. See Erikson (1966).

36. See Davis (1983) and Zerubavel (1996b).

left academia after he was denied tenure at the University of California San Diego: officially rejected by academia, he kept writing great pieces of sociology such as *What's So Funny?*³⁷ To me, it has been refreshing to see how someone can be motivated from within, in spite of all the injustices.

Erikson, Coser, Davis — for all of them it's way beyond the work itself, it's rather something in their personal style that I took from meeting them. You know, both with Erikson and Coser there was a big age gap: in a way, they have been sort of father figures — and I really needed that, since I've had a very bad father and a very bad mentor (as a father figure) in Goffman. That kind of support towards someone younger was crucial to me, and you don't learn this in methods courses.

LS: Still on the subject of personal experience, you've worked in different sociology departments, studying at Penn, then working at universities like Pittsburgh, Columbia, CUNY's Queens College, Stony Brook, and Rutgers. What was the experience of developing your sociology and intellectual style in these different environments?

EZ: Penn, Stony Brook and Rutgers were the sociologically important ones for me. The dimension on which I would compare them has to do with the tolerance towards exotic, heterodox, strange stuff. I'm saying this with a smile because I don't think that my works are inherently exotic or exoteric, but they have been treated as such within sociology for quite a long time. I got my doctoral degree 42 years ago and I have never been part of the mainstream: yes, sure, I got my accolades, but always without being in the mainstream. This is something that has its disturbing consequences (I paid for it), but I somehow chose it to be my way: therefore, the point is how this approach is tolerated by the environments in which you operate.

In the previous question, I forgot to talk about Renée Fox. She was very influential in my decision to study time: not only she accepted my decision, but she even encouraged it (in many other departments, this would not have been possible). Renée was the chair of the department and she put her mark on it, in terms of being particularly receptive and welcoming. Only later, over the years and after hearing other people's experience, I've realized how unusual Penn was during Renée Fox's time as chair. Stony Brook and Rutgers as well have been comfortable with my alleged strangeness, letting me shape many cohorts of students. It was Columbia that was very different and made me feel awkward with my sociological perspective and intellectual path.

LS: If I may ask, would you mind saying something more about your relationship with Robert K. Merton?

EZ: Well, there were several Mertons. You know, he was a magician when he was young. Magicians are known to manipulate realities so that what you see on the outside is very different from what there is on the inside. While the appearances were a lot of admiration for my work (he used to talk openly about what great work I did and so on), behind the scenes he acted very differently. There's no way I would have been denied tenure if he had supported me. Merton liked super-servile lackeys around him. He required a degree of personal loyalty that I was never ready to give him. I mean, I appreciated him intellectually. Actually, during my time at Columbia, the department of sociology was full of Simmelians — between him, Peter Blau, Viviana Zelizer (one of the few “lights” for me at Columbia), Allan Silver, it was a heaven for a Simmelian. But personally, it was different.

LS: Elias once said that “one has the impression that in recent times sociologists no longer expect that one can make basic discoveries in their field of work.”³⁸ Do you share this feeling, or do you think, instead, it could be just a perspective bias? What recent underappreciated/underrated sociological works have really impressed you? Have you been influenced by other sociologists in recent years?

EZ: When you say “discoveries,” I have to bring back a distinction that I once drew, the differentiation between “factual novelties” and “intellectual novelties.”³⁹ The novelties that attract me

37. See Davis (1993).

38. Elias (1987, p. XXV).

39. “Whereas the ethnographer has been traditionally motivated by the desire to know *more* about the social world [discoveries of ‘factual novelties’], the analytical field researcher would most likely be motivated by the wish to know about it *in different ways* [discoveries of ‘intellectual novelties’]. Whereas the former has been concerned primarily with the contents of social

the most are the intellectual ones. I read very little descriptive works or works related to a specific period/context/situation only. I much prefer those analyses that move between different settings, different theoretical perspectives, different epistemological paradigms. This is why I mentioned Murray Davis: I loved his work because it is the closest thing to what I think sociology should be. I don't believe one can be non-perspectival, but it's possible to be multi-perspectival, and this is what's so amazing about Davis' *Smut*. You asked about underrated sociologists and Murray Davis is absolutely the most underappreciated US sociologist, there's no doubt. With regard to underestimated sociological works, I'll tell you something: I've had several students whose books are still underrated — Christena Nippert-Eng's *Home and Work* (1996); Wayne Brekhus's *Peacocks, Chameleons, Centaurs* (2003); Jamie Mullaney's *Everyone Is NOT Doing It* (2005); Asia Friedman's *Blind to Sameness* (2013); Thomas DeGloma's *Seeing the Light* (2014). I think they are all underappreciated. It doesn't mean, of course, they are not appreciated at all (they got acclaims, jobs and so on), but I do believe they deserve much more appreciation. I mean, they are not the only ones, but just the ones I know best.

10 The Present and the Future of Sociology

LS: One final question: how do you see the future of sociology? What do you think are the great institutional issues confronting the discipline today? What sorts of theoretical questions do you think we should be focusing on in order to assure that sociology survives as a discipline into the Twenty-second century? And foremost: will sociology survive at all?

EZ: Well, to answer I would like to go back to a conversation I had with Peter Berger in the early 1980s. I asked him “How come you never attend sociological meetings like the American Sociological Association annual conference? Why don't you come? And why don't you publish in sociology's journals anymore?” and he said he doesn't like the discipline. I replied, “You are one of the pillars of this discipline, there are plenty of people who have come to sociology because of your work, including myself.” He said, “It's all going down, it's too ideologized now.” I told him, and this is my answer to your question, that I see a distinction between sociology as a discipline (if you like, as a field) and sociology as a perspective. I really think that as a perspective sociology is unique and irreplaceable. And I believe sociology should be better seen as sociologies, in the plural rather than singular form, because it is similar to an octopus, it does not have a hegemonic paradigm.

I don't even know if the mainstream (meaning the positivism) is the majority today. Sure, it's still dominant: if you want to publish in the *ASR* and *AJS*, you can publish things like my own only as tokenism, something that they need to showcase once in a while. Unfortunately, there's still the big split of “qualitative vs. quantitative” sociology, lexically helped by Glaser and Strauss (I did try to dissuade Barry Glassner from titling a journal *Qualitative Sociology*, as he did in the late 1970s). I find that's a silly distinction, but sociology today is even more fragmented, and the “field” is moving into several fields. In this sense, I'm not really sure about the future of sociology. It's easier to predict the future of academia, speaking of institutional issues. Things are very sad so far, and academia is not going to be the same: I couldn't even imagine its present situation when I entered it in the early 1970s. It is more and more corporatized, it has to do with the politics of science and little or nothing with intellectual dimensions.

You know, there's a lot of cynicism today in academic sociology, I share some of the cynicism but not to the point of, say, refraining from encouraging a young, shining undergraduate. A lot of sociologists would probably say “Twenty-second century? We don't even know if it gets to the middle of the Twenty-first century!”. It's a dark view, which I don't completely share, but the reality is not promising.

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life, the latter would most likely be concerned mainly with the formal patterns that underlie it” (Zerubavel, 1980, p. 29).

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