

Lazarsfeld's Legacy

Introduction

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This Forum marks Paul F. Lazarsfeld's (1901–1976) enduring significance with eight articles that, taken together, illustrate his polymathic breadth. It is telling that none of the articles is centered on Lazarsfeld's contributions to communication research. The partial exception is Elihu Katz's tribute ("His Master's Voice") to his former teacher, delivered to a crowded Prague hall at the 2018 International Communication Association and reprinted here.² In the Forum's other contributions, we encounter a handful of alternative Lazarsfelds: the innovative methodologist, research-bureau impresario, sociologist of academic life, political analyst, and lifelong socialist. Even this catalog fails to capture Lazarsfeld's full intellectual spread. Yet the Forum articles make the attempt and continue what is now a decades-long recovery project—an effort, by Katz and others, to challenge still-resonant caricatures of the Austrian émigré.

Lazarsfeld, according to the field's straw-built memory, was an apolitical positivist. This image was fixed, first and with lasting effect, by C. Wright Mills (1959) in his stirring manifesto *The Sociological Imagination*. Mills (1959) cast his former boss as a sterile empiricist—a foreman of the method factory (pp. 50–75). Todd Gitlin (1978), the ex-New Lifter, issued a similar indictment two decades later. Lazarsfeld and his Columbia research shop, wrote Gitlin, were media sociology's "dominant paradigm," with reams of lifeless empiricism winning ideological cover for Lazarsfeld's media-industry patrons. Around the same time, British cultural studies defined itself against Lazarsfeld's "behavioral mainstream hegemony," as Stuart Hall (1982) phrased it in an influential essay (p. 53). The result was that, by the 1980s, "Lazarsfeld" was synonymous with a series of epithets: positivist, behaviorist, mainstream, dominant, functionalist, and even portmanteaux like "neopositivists of the dominant paradigm" (Rosengren, 1983, p. 200).

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² With great sadness, we learned of Elihu Katz's passing on New Year's Eve, 2021, just as this Forum was set to publish. Katz, who encouraged us to organize the collection, was Lazarsfeld's student and co-author. He was also the guardian of Lazarsfeld's legacy for communication research, a role he played with humility and filial devotion. In the seven decades since *Personal Influence* (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955), Katz extended Lazarsfeld's Columbia tradition in remarkably creative ways—delivered on its many promises, one after another, decade by decade. We dedicate this Forum to his memory.

These descriptors, which remain in circulation, are lazy and even a bit silly, at least as applied to Lazarsfeld. One irony is that Lazarsfeld himself lent his brush to the caricature, first by adopting the “administrative research” label, and then by publishing (with Katz) the most influential summary—by far—of his own media research output. “Administrative research” was Theodor Adorno’s unflattering shorthand for Lazarsfeld’s late-1930s radio research operation; Lazarsfeld, contrary to received memory, worked closely with the exiled Frankfurt School for two decades in what was a complicated but mutually beneficial relationship (Wheatland, 2005). In a nuanced, now famous, but rarely read 1941 essay in the Frankfurt Institut’s house journal, Lazarsfeld defended administrative research. The term has hung around his neck ever since. Something similar happened with *Personal Influence* (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955): The book’s first-chapter narration of a reassuring minimal effects finding had the inadvertent consequence of blotting out the Columbia tradition’s rich and sophisticated legacy—not least Lazarsfeld’s own.

Katz (e.g., 1987, 2001) has led a rearguard campaign to restore Lazarsfeld’s reputation. Others (e.g., Jeřábek, 2017; Morrison, 2012; Simonson & Weimann, 2003) have joined Katz in battering what is a surprisingly durable strawman. The biggest target is the “positivism” charge. As his defenders have shown, Lazarsfeld was no positivist—certainly not in the philosophy-of-science sense, nor in terms of the looser, pejorative meaning assigned to the term in the 1970s. The “positivism” label is often used to mean something like “quantitative evangelist”—and here again, as the Lazarsfeld revisionists have demonstrated, the charge is preposterous. From his earliest studies in Vienna on through to his final Columbia years, he was keen to mix qualitative and quantitative methods—and devoted significant meta-methodological reflection to qualitative approaches (e.g., Lazarsfeld, 1972). As for the corporate-skill charge, it is true that Lazarsfeld applied a shape-shifting savvy to his research rhetoric, so that he might mute industry criticism if the audience included industry patrons. He admitted as much, and famously referred to the funded, data-dependent communication researcher as a “tightrope walker” (Lazarsfeld, 1948, pp. 115–116). But he was, especially when addressing fellow scholars, a sharp and often critical analyst of the industry and its products.

The eight articles in this Forum serve to unflatten Lazarsfeld—to restore some of the roving creativity that marked his career. David Morrison’s study revisits the hothouse intellectual culture of Viennese *Kreise* (Circles), which, he shows, shaped Lazarsfeld’s polyglot outlook on knowledge. Joseph Malherek’s contribution addresses an adjacent dimension of Lazarsfeld’s Viennese youth. The Social Democratic Party, with its Austro-Marxist underpinnings, cultivated in Lazarsfeld a respect for, even deference to, empirical inquiry that was, Malherek concludes, on rich display in his landmark *Marienthal* study (Jahoda, Zeisel, & Lazarsfeld, 1933). *Marienthal* is also a touchstone in the Forum contribution by Hynek Jeřábek, which documents Lazarsfeld’s panoramic legacy of methodological innovations that, notably, spanned the quantitative-qualitative divide and continue to ramify across the social sciences.

The remaining Forum papers center on Lazarsfeld’s post-emigration career in the United States. Hans-Joerg Tiede chronicles Lazarsfeld’s study of McCarthyism, *The Academic Mind* (Lazarsfeld & Thielens, 1958), which historians of social science have largely ignored. Based on a large-scale survey of university faculty, Lazarsfeld and his collaborator Wagner Thielens found relatively low levels of anxiety among professors. As Tiede shows, Lazarsfeld came to have regrets about the study’s design. Elena Hristova, in her Forum contribution, takes a wide aperture look at Lazarsfeld’s Bureau of Applied Social Research. Based on records from 1941 to 1955, Hristova demonstrates that the Bureau operated with a gendered division of

labor, in which women were disproportionately relegated to work on commercial studies. Carefully documenting the sidelining of female labor, Hristova's study contributes to a growing literature on stolen credit and stunted career paths at the Bureau (e.g., Rowland & Simonson, 2014). The relationship recounted in Ralph Schmidt and Thomas Petersen's article was, by contrast, predicated on parity and mutual respect. Drawing on correspondence, Schmidt and Petersen reconstruct Lazarsfeld's deep friendship with the German scholar Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann, after their meeting in 1960. Among many other things, Lazarsfeld encouraged Noelle-Neumann to incorporate humanistic approaches into her Allensbach Institute's work. The Forum article by Anthony Oberschall, Lazarsfeld's former student, takes us into the 21st century. Using Lazarsfeld's coauthored election study *Voting* (Berelson, Lazarsfeld, & McPhee, 1954) as analytic baseline, Oberschall sketches a chilling picture of Trump-era U.S. politics.

It is another former student, Elihu Katz, who has the Forum's last word. Katz's 2018 talk, reprinted here, positions Lazarsfeld as a godfather of social network analysis. With affable irreverence, Katz links Lazarsfeld's legacy to a shadow forerunner, the 19th-century French sociologist Gabriel Tarde. Katz's own luminous career—up to and including his effort to operationalize Tarde (Katz, Ali, & Kim, 2014)—is a tribute to, and an extension of, Lazarsfeld's teaching on "how to read a book": Comb the classics for testable propositions.

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