

The Happiness Game**IJoC*****The Happiness Game: Notes on the Katz Canon***

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“The right thing happens to the happy man.” ~ Theodore Roethke

Canon

Canons are radically mutable. They are subject to fashion, revised thinking, creative rereading, and new archaeological finds. The Dead Sea scrolls cast a strange new light on biblical texts. Karl Marx’s 1844 manuscripts arose out of the archival dust in Moscow just in time to encourage thinkers seeking an alternative to scientific socialism. Suddenly Marx was a humanist, even existentialist figure, quite close to his philosophical master Hegel. Around the same time, in the early 1930s, Hegel’s Jena lectures were published, revealing the young thinker to have been an acute analyst of political economy’s role in justice and human flourishing. So the young Marx was a Hegelian and the young Hegel was a Marxist (before the fact). Canons are full of jokes and surprises. There can sometimes be as much variance within an author as there is between authors.

Elihu Katz not only is a theorist of the canon as a medium of communication; he also presides over a canon of works in his name. In the present case, the archaeological discovery by Paddy Scannell of *The Happiness Game: A Content Analysis of Radio Fan Mail* by Katz (1950) clarifies rather than revises the Katz canon. This important early work, one of the most sustained solo-authored pieces Katz ever wrote, showcases in an original form many of the issues he has been doggedly pursuing for over six decades, while sparing us one of the vices of intellectual historians: that of dividing an author’s work into distinct periods. Continuity is much more the hallmark, and here I note early signs of later traits. It is always easier to rediscover an adult face in a baby photo than it is to predict what a baby will look like as an adult, and Katz’s subsequent work teaches us how to read the thesis. Canons are, in part, held together by the hermeneutic benefits of hindsight.

Stylistic Minimalism

The title alone is already characteristic of Katz’s pencraft. “The Happiness Game” refers at once to American radio broadcaster Ted Malone’s February 1948 experiment of inviting audience participation by mail; the social-scientific project—even more relevant today than it was in 1950—of studying what happiness means for different people and nations and, of course, for life itself. (Just today my in-box

brought an invitation to subscribe to the *Journal of Happiness Studies*.) Katz's writing is marked by apophatic elegance; he never tries to tell all. The thesis, like his other writing, swings along in a vernacular flow with a friendly narrator who invites his readers, for instance, to hold their breath a moment longer (1950, p. 59). It is an epitome of how to link a manageable empirical focus to expansive intellectual questions. His minimalism at its best condenses clouds of thought into droplets of concepts and schemas, preferably in fourfold tables. The full display of that categorizing genius comes here in the "Happiness Quadrants," with the four kinds of Controlled, Reward, Calendar, and Surprise Happiness. Katz's implicit defense of Calendar and Surprise happiness—kinds that moralists always disapprove of—is one of the key contributions of the study.

Method Craftiness

The Happiness Game shows that Katz was a creative combiner of textual-interpretive and empirical methods from the beginning. The thesis shuns a priori definitions of "happiness" and treats it as an "emic" or "native term," whose meaning is to be discovered in the forms of its ordinary use (1950, p. 136) for "a dynamic cultural definition of happiness" (p. 87). Katz calls for "a kind of social history of the concept of happiness" (p. 130). The thesis is methodologically savvy in handling reporting biases: people tend to underreport ego-involved sources of unhappiness (p. 53) and are inclined to report being happy, given the cultural norm (p. 97), something later known as the "acquiescence bias." There are reporting biases away from culturally sensitive topics. Indeed, his brilliant epigraph from Thomas and Znaniecki (1918–1920) is a good deal more sober than are Malone's correspondents: "It is certain that both the relations of the sexes and the economic situation are among the conditions of human happiness, in the sense of making it and spoiling it" (Katz, 1950, p. 2). (Katz notes how little sex and money figure in the reported sources of happiness [ibid., 1950, p. 88].) The marriage of humanistic and social science methods was there from the beginning for Katz. The epigraph comes from *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America*, sociology's greatest study of letters and their ability to maintain social bonds at a distance. Ever since, Katz has been studying the methods and media of maintaining community when scattered across space and time, even though he is here more interested in Thomas and Znaniecki's understanding of motives than he is of the pleasures and networks found in letters.

Columbia Meets Chicago

In accord with his classifying genius, Katz likes to divine communication theory and research into schools associated with cities or universities (Katz, Peters, Liebes, & Orloff, 2003). Just as in *Canonic Texts in Media Research*, the watertight compartments get leaky very quickly in *The Happiness Game*. The thesis partakes obviously in the Columbia BASR tradition of dealing with applied questions and data generated by the media industry. But he was just as interested in symbolic interactionist questions that are typically—e.g., by Katz and Dayan (2003)—associated with University of Chicago sociology about how media personae can reach across the threshold into people's everyday lives in forms of "parasocial interaction" (Horton & Wohl, 1956). *The Happiness Game* is fascinated with how celebrities can cultivate relationships with audience members that are felt to be authentic and sincere (1950, pp. 46–47). Katz briefly speculates on "the paradoxical effects of this new kind of intimacy" that is enabled by distance and lack of personal acquaintance, but does not dismiss it out of hand (p. 114). Merton, Fiske, and Curtis

(1946) had already explored this territory with regard to Kate Smith's "propaganda of the deed," so the permeable border of between broadcasting industry and audience experience was already in place. *The Happiness Game*, of course, is a study of events, and it is clear that there are plenty of continuities between media events research and Columbia classics. *Mass Persuasion* (1946) is the most proximate source for media events with their analysis of how distance collapses, the alienation of the transmission vanishes, and the lives of the viewers and the viewed mingle in extraordinary ways, whether in festivity or grief.

Or in comic mismatch. Katz notes a letter in which the writer reports of her happiest day listening to a radio show called "Bride and Groom." In the episode, a newly-wed couple received a new mobile home:

I was so HAPPY! I started to cry. By the time . . . (the MC) told them about it, I was about to burst with happiness. "Don't cry" said (the MC's) voice over the radio. "I can't help it," I sobbed, "I'm so happy!" I guess he must have been telling the little bride not to cry. (1950, p. 66)

The correspondent briefly heard the MC talking especially to her, but she pulls back from this intimate (or psychotic) moment by realizing that the comment was directed to the bride within the radio world. More curiously, she recounted this brief bit of liminality in a letter to a radio personality, performatively enacting just the relationship that she realized did not occur on "Bride and Groom." This letter writer dismissed personal address on one radio show, but sought it via the letter medium to another. When audiences write to radio personalities personally, that is fan mail; when radio personalities speak personally to audience members, that is delusion (according to the psychiatrists) or ideology (according to the critical theorists). But Katz characteristically takes such communion in a less dismissive way. He sees Malone as enabling the magic stance essential for any felicitous ritual performance: the suspension of disbelief. There is also a whiff here of the old theological problem of vicariousness, one person standing in for another, which is one source for the modern notion of personhood (Allport, 1937). Katz is fascinated in an almost Catholic (Durkheimian) kind of way with the ontology of the symbolic. Communication for him is never merely epiphenomenal, but a direct shaper of experience and world. The seed is there in the thesis, but it would be a full-grown tree within decades.

Against Mass Society Theory

In his *Fifteen Pages that Shook the Field*, Pooley (2006) notes that Katz (1955), in *Personal Influence*, provided a narrative in which communication research emerged from an image of mass society. It was never very clear exactly what targets Katz had in mind, as his references point to Chicago sociologists, but the tone implies something more sinister (the Frankfurt School perhaps?). *The Happiness Game* provides clear evidence of Katz's sources: Erich Fromm, whom Katz treats at length. Fromm (1941) said that "man," in being freed from the premodern order, has not gained freedom in the sense of self-actualization. "Freedom, though it has brought him independence and rationality, has made him isolated and, thereby, anxious and powerless" (p. viii). Katz has been contesting this kind of claim—modern, atomized, rudderless people—for decades. For him there is always plenty of *Gemeinschaft* left to go

around. In his depathologizing of fan mail—an intellectual move that has deeper origins at BASR as Simonson shows in this issue—Katz begins his defense of the communicative competence of ordinary people. It was news in *Personal Influence* that people still talk. Quite like Habermas (though Katz might refer sooner to Tarde), Katz sees in the mere fact of communication itself a spark of hope for a decent society. And he sees, in a bundle of fan mail from February and March 1948 from the central and rural regions of the county, a worthy, potential answer to one of the greatest of all philosophical questions: Small, ordinary thoughts are as worthy as any other. Katz is willing to call both Kate Smith and Ted Malone “American philosophers.” Even if not a full-blown critique of Mandarin know-it-all authority, Katz’s demotic sensibility is clear.

Katz is also implicitly critical of Fromm’s overly activist understanding of happiness as coming through work and seeking ultimate meanings. The thesis raises the venerable philosophical question: Is felt happiness genuine? As Katz (1950) notes, “It is difficult to pass judgment on the ‘real’ happiness or unhappiness of people who report ‘experience’ events as happy” (p. 107). On the one hand, if people feel happy, that is an undeniable, phenomenological fact. The question is rather like a puzzle from analytic philosophy: Could you have a home headache test analogous to a home pregnancy test? You can be pregnant without knowing it, but can you have a headache without knowing it? If you feel like you have a headache, you ipso facto have a headache, and no external verification is necessary. Pain is almost always self-evident, although there is such a thing as phantom pain, which is phenomenologically real (though without a physical basis), as in the case of amputated limbs. Katz is not eager to deny people the right to be happy, even if they do not meet Fromm’s high standards (p. 98).

But is happiness also self-evident? Katz also knows that the question of genuine happiness is not easy. There are many reasons to distrust subjective experience. We can see a deranged person laughing and clapping and feel profoundly sad—not because this person feels sad, but because we project our misery if we were to find ourselves in such a self-unaware position. Are Homer’s sedated lotus eaters happy? A classic attack on utilitarianism is to ask the relative value of a dissatisfied Socrates and a satisfied pig. Marx said that people can have false consciousness, and Kierkegaard said that people can be in despair and not know it. Most critical social thought says that people can be profoundly self-deceived in happiness. The question of happiness gets right at the intersection of phenomenology and critical theory, of the natural attitude and distrust.

At this intersection sits the fan. What are we to make of a letter flagged by Katz?

I know your happiness game was just another bid for fan mail but nevertheless I think it was a swell idea. The psychology of looking for happiness instead of gripes is right off the “top shelf”—and I was glad to play it, pleased to rise to your bait for another fan letter. (1950, p. 116)

Horkheimer and Adorno (1994) seem to comment directly on this letter: “The triumph of advertising in the culture industry is that consumers feel compelled to buy and use its products even though they see through them” (p. 167). For Horkheimer and Adorno, the letter writer could only be “glad” in a cynical way, enjoying the enlightened false-consciousness of knowing he is feeding the industry

but doing it anyway (Sloterdijk 1987). Fromm's high standards also make it next to impossible for an ordinary person to count as happy. Katz (1950) is not so sure: "Still, the basic problem is the question of 'genuineness.' It would be meaningless for us to 'decide' the argument, though our bias, surely, is evident" (p. 145). The bias is evidently toward the authenticity or at least reality of subjective experience, a willingness to let "outer" factors weigh as much as "inner" ones. Katz has a much stronger, if muted, dose of solidarity to ordinary folks than do the Frankfurt theorists. As you would expect from a theorist (later) of holidays, Katz implies Calendar happiness is genuine.

The Reflexivity of Social Science

Malone and Katz (1950) are both in the same position of analysts of American society. Malone brags: "'I can tell you how the love life of Americans is going at any given time without any need of surveys, analyses or Kinsey reports.' Malone contends that he could write the nation's headlines—without seeing a newspaper—by reading the mail that is sent to him" (p. 29). Malone aggregates data; Katz mines it. The celebrity gathers the data for the sociologist; things are getting a bit topsy-turvy here. Katz studies the uses and gratifications of fan mail, but the topic of the mail is itself uses and gratifications (happiness). "The Happiness Game," as managed by Malone, is a gigantic, vernacular social science experiment in which people self-report on the uses and gratifications they get from ordinary life. Katz does an academic Uses & Gratification (U&G) study of the reports produced by a popular U&G study conducted by Ted Malone; the thesis is almost a meta-analysis. U&G seems to have been an industrial genre before it was an academic one.

This close identity of the methods and media of social science at mid-century was shared across a wide range of work. Kurt Lewin, for instance, was a pioneer in using film in experiments as experimental materia and as an educational medium. His undergraduate research assistant at Cornell in 1934 was Allen Funt, who observed mothers and nurses interacting with infants from behind a one-way mirror (Zimbardo, Maslach, & Haney, 2000, p. 197). Funt later become famous for his TV show *Candid Camera* (first titled *Candid Microphone*). Funt fits squarely into the shared project of mid-century social science and documentary (film and radio) to catch human behavior when people did not know they were being observed. The great Russian documentary film-maker Dziga Vertov (1984, p. 57), indirect source of the term *cinéma vérité*, believed it was best to shoot with a hidden camera so as to catch life "unstaged." The same quest for unvarnished social life guided both Stanley Milgram, an amateur documentary filmmaker, and Erving Goffman, who worked during the early 1940s at the Canadian National Film Board at Ottawa, then under the direction of the great documentarist John Grierson (Winkin, 1988). All these examples can be seen as forerunners of the "reality" TV genre, which is relatively unsparing and unedifying in its view of humans (McCarthy, 2008). Ted Malone's work in the very different genre of radio points in a more edifying direction. Like that of Oprah Winfrey later, the recipient herself of 250 million pieces of fan mail before her retirement, Malone's message was to find happiness amid the daily round and to take part in middlebrow literary uplift in programming that stood out as an oasis amid darker broadcast fare. The resemblance is partial: Malone utterly lacked Oprah's narrative of arising from abuse and captivity to leap the hurdles of race, gender, and class, but both were involved in what one of Malone's fans called "the ministry of cheer" (Katz, 1950, p. 23).

Both Katz and Malone were working in the shadowlands between industry and research. Malone followed the old industrial strategy of encouraging audiences to produce and send their own texts, still carried on in our day of user (loser)-generated content. His show was both the sweetest dream of active audiences (listeners as coauthors) and the worst nightmare of critical theory (listeners as unpaid laborers in an industrial system that is largely opaque to them.) For decades the standard critique of communication research at Columbia was that it was hopelessly entangled with administrative interests, but Katz's *The Happiness Game* suggests that we have hardly begun to see how deep the rabbit hole of entanglement goes—with the popular media of the day, with American culture, with the hopes we all have in one way or another for happiness. If only all research revealed so much and provided so much to think about.

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