

# Cicourel's sociological style "dans les marges": When the personal meets the professional

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## ABSTRACT

*Aaron Cicourel's sociological approach adeptly merged personal and professional realms, making complex theories accessible through everyday examples. His awareness of power and authority shaped his interdisciplinary work at University of California San Diego (UCSD), fostering strong social ties across departments. Cicourel's sociability extended beyond academia, engaging with non-academic staff and speaking multiple languages. His egalitarian attitude and skepticism towards rigid theories underscored his commitment to authentic social interactions. Influenced by his culturally blended Ladino Jewish background and experiences during the Korean War, Cicourel focused on obedience, disobedience, and bureaucratic authority. His personal anecdotes often intertwined with professional insights, highlighting his empathy for marginalized groups. Methodological rigor was central to his identity as a sociologist.*

*Having a conversation with Aaron Cicourel is a total experience. His capacity for bringing up deep theoretical and methodological issues through everyday examples and lay terms makes lunch a highly enjoyable and academically intense encounter. (Interview to Aaron Cicourel, 2014)*

Cicourel was deeply aware of power and authority as the key mechanism for the development of both everyday and academic life. Such awareness defined his way of organizing work at the department of Cognitive Science in the University of California, San Diego (UCSD), Cicourel was a man with many good friends around campus. His undergrad in Experimental Psychology at UCLA gave him status when drafted during the Korean War to a mental hospital in a military base and was the basis for his familiarity later on with the labs at UCSD. He had lunch with everyone, from the neurologists at Salk Institute to the biologists at Scripps Institution of Oceanography. He always chose great places off campus because of his love of food, which made him label himself and his wife Meryll as foodies.

Interdisciplinarity was not an intellectual position for Aaron, but a daily practice that involved a lot of walking (this is how he kept fit until old age) and talking in corridors, offices and coffeeshops. And he was a name dropper -- not necessarily to impress his interlocutor, but to make explicit the necessary links that make the fabric of academia. He was a promoter of weak links *avant la lettre*: Cicourel was careful with his relationships, cared after his colleagues that quickly became friends. My PhD advisor Carlos Lozares, who was good friends with Aaron, invited him to contribute to the book *Interaccion, redes sociales y ciencias cognitivas (Interaction, Social Networks and Cognitive Sciences) (2007)* to show such theoretical and methodological points of contact, which also reflects in my own work, as I will show tomorrow.

Aaron was a helper: he gave directions, recommended restaurants, visited locations for visiting professors, sped up paperwork. Because of his deep knowledge of Parsons, Weber, Mead and Schütz, he looked at the world as a bureaucratic machine populated by cognitive actors with taken for granted knowledge that escaped contractual conditions. Aaron was aware of the power of daily contacts, and how relationships also shaped how he positioned himself in relation to sociological theory. In contrast with Garfinkel's distinction between lay and scientific rationality, Cicourel traced a continuum from the citizen to the scientist. He believed in monism in methods, following one of his professors in Cornell, Hans Reichenbach and his pragmatic logical positivism.

The integration of different levels of analysis was the academic responsibility of a radical egalitarian attitude that made him, on the one hand, a strongly sociable fellow across the social hierarchy, and on the other hand, a healthy skeptical towards theory. His democratic attitude was closer to the togetherness of Sennett's Chicago School of thought, than to a Marxist compromise, despite knowing for a fact that his political views were much more to the left than most of his colleagues in San Diego.

Aaron's sociability made him talk and know closely many of those working in the department, especially cleaners, administration personnel and food handlers. For him everyday interaction in other languages than English was common for Cicourel, an exception in the Californian campus dynamic. Simply put, he often spoke Spanish to supermarket cashiers or waitresses, a rare occurrence, and was in first-name basis with many of the nonacademic workers on campus. Let me point out that UCSD lays in a strongly segregated place, where Jewish were not able to buy property until the 70's, and whose Black student presence is anecdotal: The enrolled student population at UCSD nowadays is 30% Asian, 20.7% Latino, 19.4% White, and 1.7% Black. By

comparison, enrollment for all Doctoral universities in the US is 47.5% White, 15.5% Latino, 9.58% Black, and 9.44% Asian.

This way of stepping out of the box was the backbone of his whole career, and I very much think was deeply interlinked with his background and a working-class, culturally blended Ladino Jewish family living in LA during barbaric times. In the interview I had with him in 2015 there is this great anecdote about how his father would take him to work sometimes in his car, and how they would stop for lunch at a restaurant, where they ate for free after his father sang in Turkish. Aaron himself had a nice voice, enjoyed music and most of his grandchildren are good musicians. He told me how his first memories were of the lullabies his mother sang in XVth century Spanish, a Jewish heritage he was most proud of. A personal anecdote is that the first time I met Aaron, probably around 2004 at UAB (Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona), I thought he was from Argentina. I couldn't place his accent.

His interest in obedience and disobedience, a key topic after nazism and fascism appears already during his work as an experimental psychologist when he was drafted to a military psychiatric ward in Indiana during the Korean War. He said:

"My experience with psychiatric patients while serving in the U.S. Army also taught me about how bureaucratic authority could be manipulated such that an organization's bureaucratic practices could be altered" (Interview to Cicourel, Muntanyola-Saura, 2015).

During his service at the military base, Cicourel pointed out the existence of abusive male helpers, that were no certified nurses, within the mental hospital he was working in. Denouncing and analyzing the roots for unjust treatment as elements of social interaction within the bureaucratic structure is a constant in Aaron's work and shaped his career. Early on, he left UC Riverside where he was just been appointed chair of the Sociology department because of what he deemed unfair treatment towards two professors he had appointed for hiring. In 1964-1965, he was at UC Berkeley by invitation of Leo Lowenthal, exiled from the Frankfurt School and Philip Selznick from organizational theory. There, Howard Garfinkel asked Aaron to be part of Harvey Sacks' PhD Committee. Sacks became the founding figure of Conversational Analysis, despite

his early death in a car crash. Other members of CA were Gail Jefferson (the creator of the Jefferson Transcript widely used in linguistics and ethnomethodological studies of communication), David Sudnow and Emanuel Schegloff. CA's take on everyday communication as logical and structured deeply influenced Cicourel's empirical work. At the time, it seems that Garfinkel, who was Sacks' PhD Advisor, had problems finding members for his Committee.

Once in UC Santa Barbara, another unjust situation arose, according to Cicourel. He did not agree with the decision of not awarding tenure to Walter Buckley: He finally got the position, but together with other factors, such as not getting money to finance a Linguistics department together with David Premack, he applied for a position at UCSD, where he stayed for more than 40 years. He spent most of these years at the School of Medicine but was also one of the founding members of CogSci. As Emeritus he belonged to the ICL (Interactive Cognition Lab) directed by David Kirsh, a Canadian Analytical Philosopher from Oxford. This is the lab I worked in during my Fulbright as a postdoc and later as a UCSD instructor. Nowadays, the most popular degrees at UCSD are Cognitive Science, Computer Science and Anatomy. So Cicourel contributed to the consolidation of an interdisciplinary degree with the highest enrollment.

I guess a point I want to make is that Aaron worked as he lived: together with people, thinking jointly in Schutz terms, intersubjectively, sharing the time and space of her subjects in interviews and observational settings. And the reason why he was so keen on doing observation together with interviewing was not only that he was very good in adopting the position of the curious and at the same time "harmless" individual, as Goffman puts it. Aaron really cared. He was not pretending. As we know as ethnographers, authenticity in role performance is key to getting relevant empirical results. One of his favorite methodological combinations was interviewing while doing observation, asking a nurse at her work station, for instance, What are you doing here? Why did you switch to paper? What are you writing about? He analyzed carefully detailed interview scripts to elicit implicit cognitive components of their socially invisible work.

In Cicourel's work on dementia, first at Cornell during his PhD and much later in San Francisco when he headed towards retirement (if he ever retired, which he actually did not) he studied how aging people lose their conception of self and sense of social structure. He understood aspects of this desocialization process thanks to becoming a confidant, for instance, for a Catholic priest, one of the few socialization agents for

some of these patients. At one point, the priest called Aaron and told him that Tom, one of the patients, was not coming to church anymore. When Cicourel went to his home, he explained that he didn't go because he didn't recognize the faces and the names, so he was ashamed and preferred staying in. The project goal of finding quasi-invariant patterns of behavior was achieved through these careful threading of social interactional waters.

His habit of acute observations and analogic thinking and inference, as Howard Becker formalized in his book *What About Mozart? What About Murder? Reasoning from Cases* (2014), appeared in his personal stories as well. For instance, the same day he told me about Korea, he recalled me how he went to one of the first Bob Dylan's concerts in Berkeley in the 70's, when Dylan entered the scene on the back of a Hell Angel' biker, and how after that he got to know Joan Baez. He was specifically disappointed by how Bob Dylan mistreated Baez, since Aaron thought highly of her and he considered Dylan ended their relationship in unfair terms, something that is portrayed in a recent Joan Baez documentary called *I am Noise* (2023). While I do not know how Aaron responded to gender theory and women studies, he offered both in his daily life and in his stories examples of positioning himself with the victim, women, non-white or working class. His own Jewish Ladino and working-class background shaped by multiple labels seems key here. For instance, in his work on juvenile criminal justice, together with John Kitsuse back in the 60's, his interest was in making visible how local police biases and routine bureaucratic practices among law enforcement agencies and the judicial system show conditions existed that were systematically biased against low-income Caucasian, Latino, and African American adolescents.

Despite his love for fieldwork and interaction with subjects, his radical interdisciplinary take, that develops into the integrated model that will be developed in tomorrow's talk, made him a convinced monist in terms of method. Aaron was a one method fits all kind of guy. He identified himself as a scientist in Mertonian terms, and in his narratives the figures of important biologists, neurologists or cognitive scientists appeared constantly. In his own words: I have always liked the remark stated by the French biologist François Jacob (1998, p. 767): "Our breakthrough was the result of 'night science': a stumbling, wandering exploration of the natural world that relies on intuition as much as it does on the cold, orderly logic of 'day science.'" That said, as the quote shows, such monism did not bring about a believer in a positivist or detached scientific method. However, he was a deep realist that got nervous with some kinds of relativism. I often

heard him say to colleagues far ahead in the constructivist continuum: "Ok, yes, but if your kid gets sick, will you give him the prescribed antibiotics or not?"

# Bibliography

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