

[*Theoretical Criminology* Vol. 6 (2002) No. 3, pp. 369-374 (special issue on 'Crime, punishment and the emotions').]

Cas Wouters¹

Giving the Finger

On *How Emotions Work* by Jack Katz (University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London 1999)

How Emotions Work is a compilation of a variety of empirical studies, analysing particular manifestations of laughter, crying, shame, and anger. They are interesting at times, particularly because Katz takes body languages and body processes seriously, focuses on their connections to emotional processes, and integrates both in his analysis. Yet, Katz' way of theorizing alarms my intellectual conscience, particularly because of his rejection of an historical perspective and his attempt to study emotions outside the wider framework of social interdependencies. This leads to a universal and eternal rhetoric, suggesting a separate realm of emotions in which each particular emotion would 'work' in a particular way that always and everywhere would remain the same. However, we cannot study emotions, period, but only emotion management. Pure emotions, unrelated to patterns of emotion management or self-regulation, are as rare as pure hearts.

Katz joins two related theoretical movements: 'bringing the body back in' and 'bringing emotions back in'. At the level of his empirical studies Katz restricts his focus to particular manifestations of the four emotions that have been singled out for analysis, trying to 'hold constant' the social relationship in which the emotion under study occurs (or not). This implies that he does not focus on the next, higher level of integration, thus neglecting crucially significant data such as people's emotional make-up and their patterns of emotion management. He restricts his data to real life, face-to-face interactions that trigger a particular emotion, such as the anger of people being 'cut off' in L.A. traffic or the crying of people speaking before large audiences.

In my view, his methodological device of 'holding constant' the social relationship in which the emotion under study occurs (or not) functions as a sieve, narrowing down the multileveled mixed flow of somatic, psychic, and social processes to a close-up

video-shot of one particular moment. Yet, within this limited focus, Katz is highly ambitious. He aims at innovative integration by showing how emotions are micro-processes of change amidst and connected to other processes of change, especially bodily processes. He does this by analysing emotional processes with a relatively strong impact on bodily, psychic and social processes, momentarily changing bodily dispositions, psychic inclinations as well as the range of behavioural alternatives. Katz's formulations, however, grate on my senses:

'The overall understanding that this volume produces,' he writes in his introduction, 'is that emotions, which have so often been treated as opposed to thinking, are paradoxically self-reflective actions and experiences. But the self-reflection in emotions is corporeal rather than a matter of discursive reasoning. Through our emotions, we reach back sensually to grasp the tacit, embodied foundations of our selves' (p.7). These words clearly indicate a swing of the pendulum from 'discursive reasoning' to the opposite side, celebrating the (re)discovery of an animalic, physical level in humans. Their meaning, however, is less than clear. Corporeal self-reflection *in* emotions? Emotions *as* corporeal self-reflective actions? These personified, foundational and either/or formulations may open a window on 'body' and 'emotions', but they close the door to comprehension.

Katz refers to the 'abiding enigma' or 'abiding mystery' of emotions when referring to the power of emotions to overwhelm people or (to use that bodily expression) to 'grab them by their balls.' He calls it a paradox that people at the same time 'shape and perform' emotions in 'artful and aesthetic' ways. Thus, Katz has decked out the old opposites of determinism and voluntarism as a paradox of abiding enigma and aesthetic genius. Most probably, this perception stems from focusing on emotions, not on (patterns of) emotion management, and focusing on intense emotional experiences will have strengthened it. That may explain also why Katz writes that his 'data focus on things people do with others when they are emotional' (p.8), thus creating a doubtful behavioural image of human beings. Whether doing things with others or not, people are *always* emotional. They cannot be *not* emotional. What varies is the intensity and complexity of emotions as well as the degree and pattern of control over them. Perceiving emotions as 'inherently labyrinthine' or as 'an abiding enigma' tends to block both theoretical ambition and further theoretical development and integration.

¹ Thanks to Bowen Paille for helpful discussions about this book.

The same goes for his perspective on emotion management as artful and as aesthetic. It shows that Katz writes in praise of *individual* emotion management. The *social* regulation of individual behaviour and feelings via the social codes of laws, manners and morals of their place and time is relatively neglected. Much of this praise of *individual* emotion management will appear to be one-sided exaggerations; the more the perspective widens to include the *social* regulation of expression. With and against the prevalent social regulation, individuals develop particular patterns of self-regulation and emotion management, which includes particular types of habitus and conscience, as well as particular ways of consciously directing themselves. What Katz refers to as a paradox is in my view a (changing) balance of emotion management. In managing their emotions, people articulate their individual selves, and this may indeed be done in artful and aesthetic ways, but only within the broader framework of (and changes in) socially preferred and allowed ways of articulation can this aesthetic quality be appreciated properly.

Particularly significant within this broader framework of changing social codes for articulation and expression are differences in power and status relationships. This can be demonstrated from Katz's attempt to single out one particular manifestation of anger. I think it fails: drivers in L.A. do not always get 'pissed off' when they get 'cut off' as he claims. The shock of being 'cut off' may prepare for fight *or* flight. If a big and menacing Rambo-looking type causes the experience of a near-accident, fear will take precedence over anger, particularly if the latter is black and the other is white. Being 'cut off' by someone like Jack Katz or myself, however, will arouse anger, unless we were driving a big truck, particularly if a rifle was visible on the gun rack. Katz neglects these differences in power and status as well as the flight-fight mechanism.

He begins and ends his chapter 'Pissed Off in L.A.' by stating and discussing the specificity of L.A. traffic. '[D]rivers in L.A. do not just "get" angry,' he writes, 'they "do" their anger, in all of the surprising and seemingly absurd ways we have already reviewed: yelling at other drivers over great distances ... getting back at the offender by risky manoeuvres ... and perhaps the most common response of all, "giving the finger" or "flipping the other off"' (p.47). This gesture of 'aggressive, phallic penetration of another's world' is seen as a symbolic brutal assault on an anal target, implying: "'I'm messing you up by attacking your most primordial source of self-control to show how you've messed with me'" (p.62/3).

Although his theory and method excludes both intra-national and international comparison, there are moments in which Katz forgets his self-imposed restrictions, for instance when writing that 'the intensity of road rage in the United States may be well related' to 'the custom in some U.S. settings of offering smiles and greetings to passing strangers' (p.79), thus implying not only that L.A. traffic is different but all of U.S. traffic as well.²

In the USA, this treatment of passing strangers and other American 'have-a-nice-day' customs, developed not only to lubricate social intercourse but also to pacify it.³ Thus the observation that L.A. drivers do not 'get angry' but 'do anger' triggers the question whether they no longer need the protection of smooth and pacifying manners as a kind of security system? Whether L.A. drivers are confident to protect themselves by controlling their anger to the point where they collectively are able to 'do' their anger?

Although Katz's theoretical and methodological stance excludes consideration of connections between power differences, anger, danger and fear, from scattered remarks at least a few lines of a sketch become apparent. One such line is Katz's description of how one of his respondents had pulled out a gun in reaction to the gesture of a driver who had shaped his hand into the form of a gun pointed at him (p.71).

As gun possession is rare in Europe, most Europeans will tend to relate this anxiety to the relatively large number of citizens in the USA possessing and using weapons. Indeed, in comparison to most European countries, the use of violence in the USA is incompletely monopolized by the state. In discussing this anxiety Katz also compares the USA with Europe, but without mentioning any of this. He relates the rise of anxiety to the 'relatively few resources for managing conflict among citizens' in Southern California as compared to Western Europe, where 'it is not uncommon to see motorists standing outside their cars, gesticulating broadly and trading round after round of shouted insults at each other, with mere centimetres separating their noses.' He also writes that the ability to trade insults in close interaction 'bespeaks faith in a cultural fabric strong enough to absorb pointed interpersonal thrusts while blocking actual

² The restricted validity of Katz's analysis to L.A. can only be unproblematic in the context of a taken-for-granted American nationalism or patriotism, or what?

³ See my chapter 'Etiquette Books and Emotion Management in the Twentieth Century: American Habitus in International Comparison', in: Peter N. Stearns and Jan Lewis (eds.), *An Emotional History of the United States*, New York University Press, New York, 1998: 283-304.

physical contact' (p.80). Here, the possible extent of 'doing anger' or 'letting go' (of anger) is perceived as dependent upon (the strength of) faith (in a cultural fabric), or, in other words, upon the level of mutual trust, particularly the trust in each other's control over impulses and incentives to use violence.

Katz's comparison of Southern California to Western Europe shows that the differences in the level of mutual trust, or more precisely, in the level of mutually expected self-restraints, are at the same time differences in social development, which implies that they are geographically as well as historically specific. Katz knows, but only in the margin of a note: 'The paradox is that on contemporary roads, the very existential insignificance of drivers' conflicts, the fact that it is foreseeable that they will soon end, is a condition of their intensity. There is a rush to get revenge before the opportunity vanishes.' In this note, Katz refers to the 'very existential insignificance of drivers' conflicts' in comparison to 'small communities where feuding parties have no sure escape from the prospect of future contact, such as was the case in medieval Iceland.' There and then, 'alternatives to compensation in blood may be found' (p.353). Indeed, recent Californian stories of road rage stick to the style of '*doing anger*': they are stories of '*doing revenge*', crucially *not* of 'bloody revenge'.

'Giving the finger' will not be a recent gesture, but it will have spread widely only after the 'flower-power era' of the 'expressive revolution'. Katz probably agrees because in a side remark he writes that 'long-time residents of Los Angeles' told him again and again 'how the incivility one now confronts on the road every day was unthinkable just fifteen years ago' (p.83).⁴

Why has this provocative gesture become popular so quickly and so internationally? It has supplanted other gestures of enmity and insult such as ticking the pointing finger to the forehead, for example in the Netherlands, and the two fingers gesture in the UK. This empirical question cannot be answered properly, I think, without an understanding of the historical process in which anger and outbursts of anger in physical violence over a long period of centuries were increasingly blocked, restricted and controlled. For without the monopolization of the use of violence by states and its concomitant process of internal pacification, '*doing anger*' or '*letting go*' of anger would have stayed far too dangerous and violent to become feasible. In other words, '*doing anger*' or '*letting go*' of

⁴ Fifteen years ago from when? The book itself does not make it possible to find out, which I take as an indication of how seriously irrelevant Katz considers historical specificity to be.

anger refer to an 'emancipation of emotions' and a relaxing of the social codes of laws, manners and morals in a process of informalization. The latter process is rooted firmly in a preceding long-term process of formalization, in which these social codes expanded and became more detailed and strict. Allowing for many varieties within a range of historical and geographical specificity, all Western societies are characterized by a development from formal hierarchical relationships demanding a rather strict ban on 'dangerous' emotions, to less unequal and increasingly interdependent relationships demanding an increasingly fine-tuned emotion management and more informal, sensitive, reflective and flexible expression. In the process of informalization, as social dividing lines became less hierarchical, more open and flowing, psychic dividing lines - in Freudian terms the dividing lines between Id, Superego and Ego - have on the whole also become less hierarchical, more open and flowing.⁵ Until the 1960s and 1970s, respectable people adhered more automatically and unthinkingly to the social code which excluded expressions such as giving the finger. From this perspective, these expressions of 'instant enmity' or 'anonymous enmity' in the passing and anonymous contacts between strangers, are related to expressions of 'instant intimacy' such as an increased use of first names, social kissing and one-night-stands. Both instant intimacy and instant enmity appear to be expressions of an ongoing 'emancipation of emotions' - the more open and easier flow of 'dangerous' impulses and emotions into the centre of personality: consciousness.

⁵ A more extensive account is given in my article 'Changing Patterns of Social Controls and Self-Controls: On the Rise of Crime since the 1950s and the Sociogenesis of a "Third Nature"', *British Journal of Criminology* 39/3 (1995): 416-432.