# Lazarsfeld, Paul F.

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Paul Lazarsfeld (1901-1976), often counted among the field's "founders," is remembered as an institutional innovator and methodologist. Trained in mathematics and psychology, Lazarsfeld established himself in the United States as a leading sociologist in Columbia University's ascendant department. He never sought out mass communication as a research focus, but nevertheless helped to set the emergent communication discipline's scholarly agenda with a series of landmark contributions from the late 1930s through the early postwar decades. In part because his best known studies were based on quantitative survey research, Lazarsfeld's reputation suffered from the backlash against so-called positivism in the 1970s and 1980s. As a result, and though he remained a standard textbook reference, his influence within the field waned. Some of his important contributions to media and communication theory, including his two-step flow model of mass communication reception, have continued to receive passing mention in the decades since. But the full richness of his theorizing about the active, socially embedded audience has been slighted, even by scholars touting viewers' creative media readings. His theorizing about media and interpersonal influence is arguably more valuable than ever, as categories like "mass" and "social" are necessarily rethought.

## **Biography**

Lazarsfeld, born in 1901 to Jewish parents prominent in Austrian socialist politics, earned his doctorate in applied mathematics at the University of Vienna. He gravitated toward the university's Institute of Psychology, led by Karl and Charlotte Bühler. Blocked by antisemitism from a conventional academic career, he established in the early 1920s a psychology-oriented market research bureau (the Wirtschaftspsychologische Forschungsstelle) with the Bühlers' blessing. In a pattern that he would repeat throughout his career, Lazarsfeld used his retail clients' projects to pursue his intellectual interests in methodology and the psychology of the decision act. Among other creative methods, he and his student-collaborators developed qualitative interview methods to plumb consumers' buying motivations. He was, at the same time, active in the Social Democratic Party's youth wing. With support from labor unions and the Rockefeller Foundation, Lazarsfeld's bureau began an in-depth study of unemployment in a village outside Vienna, Marienthal. The resulting book (Lazarsfeld,

Jahoda, & Zeisel, 1933/1971)—since recognized as a social science classic—helped Lazarsfeld secure a Rockefeller fellowship to the United States in 1933.

The fascists' seizure of power in Austria the next year led to the fellowship's extension. Lazarsfeld, during his fellowship years, traversed the United States visiting marketing and applied psychology researchers. With the aid of Columbia sociologist Robert Lynd—who had helped obtain funding for Marienthal and the subsequent fellowship—Lazarsfeld secured a government-funded post at the fledgling University of Newark. Lazarsfeld soon established a Newark Research Center at the university, modeled on his Vienna bureau and sustained by a similar mix of commercial contract research. He published regularly in outlets like the Harvard Business Review and the Journal of Applied Psychology, forging connections with the country's leading attitude psychologists and market researchers. Along with other entrepreneurial social scientists like Rensis Likert and Hadley Cantril, Lazarsfeld was active in the interdisciplinary field of sampling-based public opinion polling, which emerged in the aftermath of upstart pollsters' high-profile predictive success in the 1936 US presidential election. Financial instability at the University of Newark convinced Lazarsfeld to accept the directorship of the Rockefeller-funded Office of Radio Research at Princeton University in 1937—though he professed scant interest in the embryonic field of communication research. The Office was beset by internal conflict, and Lazarsfeld convinced Rockefeller to shift the project's affiliation to Columbia in 1939—and soon after Lazarsfeld was appointed (with Lynd's help again) to Columbia's sociology department in a now-famous 1941 joint hire with Robert Merton. By 1943 Lazarsfeld (with Merton as associate director) had renamed the radio research unit the Bureau of Applied Social Research (BASR). With close ties to the university's sociology department, BASR conducted dozens of studies for commercial and government sponsors (Barton, 1984) over the subsequent decades, almost always with academic questions smuggled along. The Bureau was shuttered in 1977, a year after Lazarsfeld's death.

Though the Bureau was known for its media research, especially in its early years, Lazarsfeld insisted repeatedly that his own foray into communication research was accidental—the work of a self-described "marginal man" (Lazarsfeld, 1969) adapting to the exigencies of funding. By the early 1950s Lazarsfeld—who had already stepped down as BASR director—turned his attention to more direct interests, including mathematical sociology and the history of methodology. Given his apparent indifference to media questions, his contributions to media and communication theory were remarkably rich. These theoretical yields can be roughly divided into two: There was, first, the better known middle-range theorizing that directly addressed the media's role in society—best exemplified by the claim for a *two-step flow* of media influence. The second bundle of relevant theory came later, after Lazarsfeld had left communication research. As a result, this work—on the underpinnings of action and motivation—is largely unknown to media scholars. It is a fitting irony that his late-career action theorizing was more plainly prefigured in his Vienna consumer research than in any research output in the intervening decades.

### Interpersonal influence

There are two main themes of Lazarsfeld's middle-range theorizing of the 1940s and 1950s. The first is that audiences selectively consume and interpret mass media. Listeners and readers, in other words, choose among the many programs or articles on offer according to their preferences, and they also—so Lazarsfeld claimed—filter those messages through the prism of their own preexisting beliefs. The second, related theme of Lazarsfeld's mid-century media research is that everyday talk and mass communication are nothing like enemies. Face-to-face talk (embedded, he would come to conclude with his student Elihu Katz, in small groups) remained crucial despite the massified, one-to-many structure of the media system. For Lazarsfeld and his colleagues, this meant that successful persuasion required would-be persuaders to attend to everyday speech. Looked at from another angle, the nesting of individuals within small groups might act as a buffer between the media and its audiences. Both themes—really empirical generalizations posited as tentative theories in the spirit of Merton's middle range—pushed back against the claim that media mold people's minds. As a result, and never so tautly as by Lazarsfeld himself (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955), his sociology of media has been repeatedly sloganized into the finding that the organs of mass communication have only "limited effects."

Lazarsfeld and his coauthors stumbled upon both themes in the fieldwork for what became *The People's Choice* (Lazarsfeld, Berelson, & Gaudet, 1944). The study was designed to track media influence over the course of the 1940 US presidential campaign, tracking a "panel" of voters in a middle-American city. To their great surprise, Lazarsfeld and his coauthors found very little evidence of media-induced opinion change (see Rossi, 1959). To account for voters' relative fixity, he and the other authors pointed to citizens' belief-affirming media choices and resistance to belief-challenging messages. Media exposure, they concluded, had the "effect of reinforcing the original vote decision." In a last, conjectural chapter, "The Nature of Personal Influence," the authors posited that interpersonal communication was potentially far more influential than the mediated kind. If anything, media messages reach the great majority only via local "opinion leaders," who filter and pass along messages to their social circles—evidence, the authors suggested, of a *two-step flow of communication*.

This pair of themes—selectivity and interpersonal influence—threads its way through a decade's-worth of Bureau-sponsored media scholarship. The core bundle of interpretive findings—that direct media persuasion is often ineffective, relative to face-to-face influence which, however, can be used to supplement direct appeals—was repackaged for different audiences (including educators, government propagandists, market researchers, and fellow social scientists) with corresponding emphases (Pooley, 2006). *Personal Influence*, published in 1955 with Katz as coauthor, emphasized the particular importance of small-group sociality in the reception, and interpretation, of mediated messages. By positioning small-group membership as a small "d" democratic seawall, the book seemed to *celebrate* the media's impact as happily negligible—to play up, in the book's subtitle, "the part played by people in the flow of mass communication."

Lazarsfeld, and by implication the Bureau, are frequently conflated with structural-functionalism, a major mid-century social theory elaborated by Harvard's Talcott Parsons. In fact, Lazarsfeld (and indeed Merton, Parsons's student) never subscribed to structural-functionalism, but *did* adhere to a low-grade, noncommittal species of functionalism. The distinction is an important one. For Lazarsfeld, there was no guarantee that the organs of mass media would contribute to social stability. Indeed, these media *did* seem to help society cohere, he concluded, but this was an empirical finding. The main effect of mass media, Lazarsfeld found, was *reinforcement*—as famously codified in former Bureau student Joseph Klapper's (1960) summary volume.

### **Action theory**

The second major theme of Lazarsfeld's communication theory is not well known, and only tangentially linked to communication as such. In his Vienna market research Lazarsfeld had improvised open-ended interview techniques that explored consumers' complex reasons for buying (see Lazarsfeld, 2011). Though his early reflections were inchoate and arguably contradictory, he was already thinking about action in ways that—if not exactly novel—were distinguished by unusual empirical sensitivity. In other words, his theorizing about decision-making was tightly bound up with his concrete survey work. He pointed to (1) the constraints of the situation (e.g., the shelf of soap brands) interacting in a looped fashion with (2) the consumer's attitudes or dispositions over (3) the course of the decision. Especially in post-emigration US writings from the 1930s, Lazarsfeld extended the temporal element of analysis to (3) longer durations, which in turn amplified the dynamism of the (1) situation-overtime and the individual's (2) evolving dispositions, especially in mutual interaction. Grappling with consumers' full biographical complexity, as well as their nonrational self-reported explanations, Lazarsfeld built up study-specific typologies to make sense of the buying act under investigation. This was methodological agility as much as theoretical consistency—the "art of asking why," as he phrased it in a now-famous 1935 article (Lazarsfeld, 1935).

He soon applied his interest in the decision act *over time* to develop a new method, the panel study. His idea was to repeatedly interview the same group of respondents (the panel) at regular intervals. Indeed each of the Bureau's three book-length studies of voting and media influence—*The People's Choice*, *Personal Influence*, and also *Voting* (Berelson, Lazarsfeld, & McPhee, 1954)—employed this panel method. Lazarsfeld and the Bureau, in effect, introduced duration to survey research.

Preoccupied with this methodological proxy, Lazarsfeld only returned to overt theorizing about action in the mid-1950s, around the same time that he abandoned media research questions. In scattered writings from the period (especially Lazarsfeld, 1958/1972), he traced the history of German action theory, and proposed a conceptual distinction (partly borrowed from Karl Bühler) between action (*Handlung*) and something like interaction—*gegenseitige Steuerung*, which Lazarsfeld rendered as "mutual modification." Individuals have goals, but these are constantly shifting owing to the actions (and expected actions) of their confederates. "From moment

to moment," Lazarsfeld wrote, "the actions of a group of individuals are changed by mutual modification" (1972, p. 459). His point was to lament the terminological conflation, in English, of action and interaction. Sociologists, in particular, focus on interaction, that is, the dance of mutual modification—"and thus crowd out the other half of the problem," the goal-oriented individual. Lazarsfeld, the accidental sociologist, was making a plea for social scientists to attend to the individual decider. Though never treated in the literature, Lazarsfeld's theory of action (and, by extension, communication) is a sophisticated alternative to both "oversocialized" conceptions like Parsons's and neopragmatist theories of creative action like those of Hans Joas.

#### Legacy

Three major misinterpretations of Lazarsfeld have clouded his legacy in communication theory and beyond: that he was (a) an apologist for the media industry, (b) a narrow-minded "positivist," and (c) a proponent of media-audience passivity in the "cultural dopes" mold. None of these charges is accurate, but Lazarsfeld himself certainly contributed to the first, given the upbeat, media-impotency framing of *Personal Influence*. And it is true that the limited-effects finding was deployed in the 1950s "mass culture" debate, by Lazarsfeld (1959) and others, to counter the more pessimistic prognoses of American media culture by conservatives and leftists. Lazarsfeld's populist conclusions led Todd Gitlin (1978), decades later, to charge that Columbia's Bureau was providing intellectual cover for the media industries. Since then, defenders (Simonson & Weimann, 2003) have highlighted critical facets of Lazarsfeld's media sociology, on display for example in a cowritten article with Merton (Lazarsfeld & Merton, 1948). The more complex reality is that Lazarsfeld—while he did downplay his erstwhile socialist politics once in the United States—was an expedient fund-seeker who, if anything, used his commercial and government contract work to pursue his own academic questions.

Those questions were very often methodological, which renders C. Wright Mills's (1959) attack on Lazarsfeld's unreflective empiricism particularly ironic. Ever since, and especially during the 1970s social science *Methodenstreit*, Lazarsfeld has been tarred with the catchall pejorative "positivist." He was, however, no positivist in the strict philosophy-of-science sense, nor even a quantitative evangelist preaching the nomothetic gospel. He was instead a deeply thoughtful (and ecumenical) methodologist throughout his career, whose contributions (and interests) were very often qualitative (Lazarsfeld, 1972). Though he assembled an impressive toolkit of practical methods, what bears stressing is the philosophical sophistication of his reflections, which he set in (albeit self-serving) historical relief.

The third and final misinterpretation of Lazarsfeld is still more striking. As cultural studies scholars in the United States and Britain celebrated the meaning-making power of media audiences in the 1980s, they frequently positioned their claims as a repudiation of Lazarsfeld and the Bureau tradition. The mid-century Columbia research was, in this vein, faulted for insensitivity to the audience's interpretive agility. The plain irony is that Lazarsfeld and his Columbia coauthors *played up* the relative power of audiences to make their own (selective) meanings.

Unfortunately, these misinterpretations have obscured the intellectual stakes raised by Lazarsfeld's mass communication research. The Bureau's stress on the mutual imbrication of face-to-face sociality and the mass media is arguably more relevant than ever in an era of "social" media. Meanwhile, Lazarsfeld's theoretical reflections on the empirical study of action (and, we could add, interaction) await discovery.

SEE ALSO: Action and Agency; Interpersonal Interaction; Media Sociology; Merton, Robert K.; Persuasion and Social Influence; Psychology, Social; Public Opinion Research; Two-Step and Multistep Flows of Communication

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