

## INTERVIEWS

# Conversation with Mark Mizruchi: “There is Very Little Organizational Theory Left in Sociology Departments”

Interviewed by Igor Chirikov



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### Abstract

Prof. Mizruchi was interviewed by Igor Chirikov, senior research fellow at the National Research University Higher School of Economics in Moscow. In the interview, Prof. Mizruchi was asked about the evolution of his research interests and peculiarities of his approach to teaching organizational theory. Prof. Mizruchi also described how he became acquainted with organizational sociology. Within his winding career trajectory from Statistical Analyst at Albert Einstein College of Medicine to Professor of Sociology at the University of Michigan, Mark Mizruchi has witnessed the development of both organizational theory and sociology of organizations and their division into institutionally separate subfields. Whether such fragmentation is methodologically important, it certainly affects the teaching process of organizational theories to students and the future of the whole field by shifting its research focus from broad and theoretical issues to more narrow and applied problems. In addition, Prof. Mizruchi shared the main ideas of his recent award-winning book (*The Fracturing of the American Corporate Elite*) and details of the creative writing process. In the final part of the conversation, Prof. Mizruchi told the story of how the Interdisciplinary Committee on Organizational Studies (ICOS) was established and how it influences research and teaching processes at the University of Michigan.

**Keywords:** organizational theory; sociology of organizations; economic sociology; political sociology; corporate interlocks; social network analysis.

— *You are best known among Russian readers for your studies of inter-organizational networks and, in particular, interlocking directorates. Could you please tell our readers how you developed your interest in this topic and what were the major areas of your research?*

— I started as a political sociologist and I got interested in corporate interlocks partly because my advisor Michael Schwartz was engaged in a big study on that topic, but also because I was interested in questions about “who had power in developed capitalist countries? How was it distributed? What’s the degree of unity and collective action among large capitalists?” There wasn’t really any organizational component when I started, but at Stony Brook one of the major professors was Charles Perrow, who taught a course on organizational sociology, which I signed up for in my first year. It wasn’t until after I took that class and then studied for my exams that I started to see how organizational theory could be useful in understanding these relationships among companies. So, I got more

interested in the general topic of organizational theory. And at that time, this was in the late 1970s, there was not even a field called “economic sociology.” But in the early 1980s, the study of corporate interlocks had become so large that some people felt that we needed a name for this field, and Mark Granovetter started referring to it as economic sociology. Mark had broader designs on that field than just corporate interlocks, but that was one of the terms used to describe what we did. Organizational theory and economic sociology are now seen as very much intertwined.

— *I noticed from your CV that you have some publications in medical journals. How did that happen?*

— That was actually completely unrelated to any of my work on interlocks. I got out of graduate school in 1980 and there was a very difficult job market in United States for sociologists. To compound things, for personal reasons, I was limited to within a close distance of New York City, and the third thing was that I was naive; it got to be around December, and I realized, gee, I should be applying for jobs, but it was kind of late. So by the time I finished — I didn’t have a lot of opportunities. I did get one offer from a small liberal arts college, but then I just fell into this job as a statistical consultant at a medical school. How that happened is a long story that I won’t go into. But it was kind of a series of accidents, and I figured “well, this is a good job, I will do it for a year or two,” but I ended up spending seven years there. I was a staff member at the computing center at Albert Einstein College of Medicine in the Bronx. As part of my job I would work on research projects of biomedical researchers. I would do the statistical analysis and I would help them out, and sometimes I would write small sections of their articles and then they would put me on as their coauthor. And I ended up with 23 publications in these biomedical journals.

— *And then you went back to sociology?*

— While I was at Einstein, I continued to do my own sociological research. That’s what kept me in the field. My first article, that I published in *Administrative Science Quarterly*, appeared in 1981 [Mizruchi, Bunting 1981], when I was at Einstein. My first book came out in 1982 [Mizruchi 1982]. I published a series of articles, I even got an NSF (National Science Foundation) grant to do my project on corporate political contributions in 1986 while I was working at Einstein. So by the time I got my first teaching job in sociology at Columbia I had already published quite a bit in sociology. And all these biomedical and psychiatric publications — that was just part of my job.

— *Do you think they influenced somehow your vision of organizations and sociology of organizations?*

— It might have had a small effect. One of the things it did is — the job was very useful because it allowed me to develop quantitative skills. It was necessary for me to learn a lot of new statistical techniques to do the work and I taught myself a lot of things. So that was very helpful. And it was really interesting to see how other fields operate. I actually gained new appreciation of sociology in terms of how theoretically sophisticated the field was. Many of the psychiatric articles did not include very well-developed theories, even if there were theories behind them. People would sometimes run analyses where they would throw in a lot of variables just see what turned up. So, I did gain a new respect for sociology.

— *How would you characterize your main areas of interest now?*

— I usually describe myself as an economic, organizational and political sociologist who uses social network analysis. I think that pretty much captures it. But I’ve always been pretty broad. Even beyond the medical stuff I was doing, I’ve had a pretty broad range of interests and publications even in sociology.

— *Do you consider your research to be a part of organizational sociology?*

— That's interesting, because as long as I've been in the field, until two years ago I had never actually taught a course in organizational sociology. I taught economic sociology, in fact, I developed the class that is now taught at Michigan. I taught it both at the undergraduate and graduate level. I have taught political sociology. But I had never actually taught a course in organizational theory, until two years ago I became the director of a program at Michigan called Organizational Studies. It's an undergraduate-only program and students are admitted in their third year. We teach them organizational theory — both macro, more sociologically oriented, and micro, more psychologically oriented. I signed up to teach the macro course, and I had to develop this class from scratch. So I went online and looked at the course syllabi of people I knew, such as Frank Dobbin and Bruce Carruthers and others who have taught the course. I also relied on what Jason Owen-Smith and Victoria Johnson, two my colleagues at Michigan, had done. And I recalled how I had been taught the field in graduate school. I have found this course harder to teach than economic sociology. Organizational theory is difficult to explain to undergraduates who haven't had a lot of experiences of being in organizations. The main theme that I try to get across to them is that there is theory about how organizations are supposed to work, but the reality is very messy. But trying to convey that and give students an appreciation for how difficult it is to operate inside organizations and how difficult they are to run — it's not an easy thing to teach. What I've been doing this time, it's my third time, is a lot more simulations and class exercises to try to give them an experience of what organizations face. Just talking about theory to them didn't seem to work.

— *So, you believe the main problem is that undergraduates don't have much experience with organizations or that the theories are complicated?*

— I think it's a combination. When I started graduate school, I had no idea what organizational theory was. I signed up for Perrow's class because the older students were recommending it. But I was clueless, and I remember my first few weeks in the class I had no idea what he was talking about. I read the case studies that he gave us and Dalton's *Men Who Manage* [1959], but I didn't really understand it. It wasn't until long after the course was over that I really started to appreciate it.

To be more specific about answering your earlier question, I think that there is very little organizational theory left in sociology, or at least in sociology departments. Almost all of the people doing this kind of work have moved to business schools, and that's true in psychology as well, maybe even to a greater extent. And what's left in organizational sociology has morphed into a lot of different areas like the sociology of work, the sociology of occupations, and a lot of work on the effects of gender in the workplace. I'm currently the chair of the ASA (American Sociological Association) Organizations, Occupations, and Work Section. The fact that those three areas are together in one section is itself significant. We've just finished putting together a series of panels for next year's meeting, and there is very little organizational theory. The sessions are mostly about work and the work process. That is a great area, it's an important area of the field, but it's not organizational theory as I learned it. One possible reason that we don't hear a lot about organizational theory in sociology is that the theories we're working with right now are pretty old. We have a group at Michigan called ICOS (Interdisciplinary Committee on Organizational Studies). We had an opening of the year session three weeks ago. I gave a talk there and I ran through the early history of organizational theory and then I mentioned that there was this revolution in the 1970s, in which we got all these new theoretical approaches, and I said that at this point I should be about halfway through my story, but actually I'm finished. And the reason is that there has basically been no new organizational theory since the 1970s. There is social network analysis, but that was really developed in sociology in the 1970s. So we're still teaching pretty old material. That's another reason, I think, why it is so hard to teach org theory to undergraduates.

— *Why do you think there haven't been new theories?*

— Well, there are a number of possible reasons. One is that those theories — the new institutionalism, population ecology, resource-dependence, and transaction-cost economics — were very powerful and compelling approaches. One of the great virtues of new institutional theory is that it's very amorphous and it is able to attach itself to almost anything. There is a certain degree of ambiguity which is good for any theory because it means it can be interpreted in different ways and applied to a lot of different problems. Another reason for their resilience, I think, has to do with the fragmentation of academic life in general, that's being reflected in the field of organizations. People are off doing relatively small pieces, relatively small problems. They aren't really dealing with big questions anymore. It's difficult to do. People have to get tenure, and you have to focus in on something. It's not that there aren't theoretical developments, but the theories that people come up with are very specific, they don't have broad applicability. So, that's one way to look at it. Another way to look at it is to say that the field is in crisis. The world has changed and we haven't kept pace with it. Here we are forty years later and where is organizational theory to deal with things like globalization or "neoliberalism" (though I don't like this term)? There are organizational elements to these phenomena, and I don't think we've adequately dealt with them.

— *Do you think that sociology needs such a subfield as organizations anymore? Or maybe the research being done within sociology of work, economic sociology, and by people in business schools is sufficient?*

— I think sociology needs this subfield. One of the virtues of organizational sociology particularly after the revolution in the 1970s is this focus on macro-level societal problems. Prior to that, most organizational theory was very internally focused, and in the 1970s sociologists in particular started saying "It is not enough to say that organizations are influenced by the environment; we need to understand that environment and study it in its own right." And that was a great strength of post-1970s organizational sociology. The problem is there are still aspects of organizations that have to be understood from the inside. There are problems that occur in organizations that I don't think can be fully understood simply by new institutional theory, or even social network theory. For example, Don Palmer has written a very important book called *Normal Organizational Wrongdoing* [2012] that draws on classic ideas within organizational sociology. He's trying to understand why organizations "screw up," for example how General Motors got into a situation in which it had to issue the recalls. Part of this is due to the kinds of external pressures that these organizations face, including competition, but what happens inside the organization is still really important. If you're just studying the larger environment you don't see that. And I still think sociology has a particular and very important role to play. For example, in Don's argument he tries to make a case that organizational wrongdoing does not just occur because there are bad people, but it's often generated by people who are perfectly normal. In other words, any one of us could himself or herself engage in these activities. It is a series of processes that occur inside the organization that leads perfectly honest, decent people to start cutting corners. Don is in a business school, but he still sees himself as a sociologist. I don't think that kind of approach would emerge if we did not have sociologists studying this.

— *Since you are the chair of the Organizations, Occupations and Work Section do you see any recent developments in the field of organizational sociology? Yes, it is in crisis, probably, and there are not so many new theories, but what are the most recent works that have impressed you?*

— It's a good question. By the way, one response to this question (Dick Scott used this argument) is simply to say that there is no crisis in organization sociology at all; the only issue is how you are defining the field. And if you are willing to define it in a more expansive way, then there are all kinds of great work being done. In other words, there are works that might not normally have been classified as organizational theory, but that could be. So, take my recent book. If we want to call it organizational theory we could: it's about large corporations

and the people who lead them. There's an example of work in organizational theory that I'd like to claim as relevant. I would probably see it more as political sociology if I had to pick one area, but it is informed by a lot of organizational theory. In terms of what I see as the key recent works in the field, many of them are things that would also be classified as economic sociology. The stuff on categorization, for example, by Ezra Zuckerman and Huggy Rao, that is a very interesting line of work. Ezra's initial paper in which he talked about the fact that if you are not easily categorized, you suffer as a result, I think that is a very interesting insight that led to a lot of really important work.

The work on identity that's being done by some of the former population ecology people is also very interesting. There are a number of people within the new institutional school who have made major advances. The recent book by Patricia Thornton, Willie Ocasio, and Mike Lounsbury [2012] is another good example. They've really pushed the new institutional theory in a promising direction. They realize that legitimacy is often a process that's fraught with conflict, there is politics involved. So, even within the broad perspectives that have been around for a long time, there have been a lot of advances.

— *What about social network analysis?*

— The social network analysis of organizations has been advancing for at least three decades. The “structural holes” argument [Burt 1992], for example, has spawned a huge amount of work. Again, it contributed a number of really valuable insights. Social network analysis has become a popular area now. It has spread into other academic fields, picked up by physicists and other hard scientists. I have to say that I remain a bit of a sceptic. I am impressed with their methodological advances. I was doing network analysis in the 1970s, and people thought we were pretty sophisticated at the time, but compared to what's going on now, what we were doing was kids' stuff. They have gone a long way in that regard. But I think in some ways they're recreating some of the same problems that we faced. One of our problems early on was “Oh, it's nice that you can show these beautiful pictures of network structures, but so what? Can you show us that these structures have any actual consequences?” And eventually we had to respond to this. So a number of us started to look for outcomes, mostly in terms of the political, economic, and strategic consequences of network ties. It is now pretty well established that there are all kinds of consequences. When I see some of these presentations now, a lot of them involve really elegant descriptions of properties of networks, but I often come away asking myself “What is the payoff?” I don't want to brand everyone with this blanket kind of statement, but that's been my experience. I have a similar reaction to the big data craze right now. I've seen some really remarkable and extremely creative applications of data used to address certain kinds of questions. But I am still not convinced that just having big data by itself is going to help us answer key theoretical and substantive questions.

— *If we now get back to your recent book The Fracturing of the American Corporate Elite [Mizruchi 2013a]. Can you please tell us how the idea to write this book came and how the research was done? Just some background information that will be interesting to our readers.*

— I think that like a lot of ideas people have, there were pieces of it that I had for a long time, but I never quite articulated. I started thinking maybe 20 years ago, “is it possible that the elites themselves have false consciousness? That they don't realize that it might be in their own interest to develop an industrial policy, for example? Or, are they aware of the fact that they seem to do better when the Democrats are in office, even though they don't like the Democrats?” I was already starting to develop the idea, but when it really started to take shape was in 2004. I was at an event organized by The Business Roundtable, which is a major organization of CEOs of the biggest American companies. The president at the time, John Castellani, was going to be giving a talk at the Detroit Economic Club, and the Roundtable contacted a few local academics who they thought might be interested in the talk, and they invited us to the luncheon. So Castellani gets up and presents a talk on outsourcing, how it's a good thing and we should all support it, which was interesting because there

were a lot of people from organized labor in the audience because it's Detroit. It was a great speech. He was articulate, and dynamic, and funny, really a pleasure to listen to. But part way through the speech he goes off on a tangent, complaining about the deficit. This is 2004, George W. Bush had just instituted his big tax cuts, and ran up record deficits, and Castellani was going on and on about the deficit, how terrible it was, how we needed to do something about it, but not one word about Bush's tax cuts having anything to do with it. And then I thought back to 20 years earlier, when Reagan had done almost the same thing George W. Bush had done. He instituted a large tax cut, and immediately ran up a huge deficit. But the difference was that in 1983 the Business Roundtable said "We have to have a tax increase" and Reagan himself also supported it. Now here it was, 20 years later, there is an identical situation and the head of an organization that pushed for tax increases 20 years ago is not saying a word today. What was going on here? So, my first take on it was that the Roundtable was not going to step up and take a difficult, unpopular stand now, the way they had in earlier days. Then I started thinking about the arguments about the sixties and seventies, about corporate liberalism and how the heads of big corporations were relatively moderate politically, and small business people were the ones who were more right-wing. I wasn't sure what the evidence really showed, but I always thought that there was probably some truth to that. And then I compared that situation with the present, where big business seems to have no sense of responsibility, and they are not willing to take any kind of unpopular stand. They seem to be different today. I started thinking about this, and the more I thought about it, the more I was convinced that I might actually have something, and so I figured that I needed to write a book about this. But I am a quantitative sociologist; I do social network analysis, I run regressions, I teach multivariate statistics — that's what I know how to do. And I knew that this book was going to have to be a historical narrative, and I did not have a clue how to do it. I think I stalled for a few years. I would talk about it and people would say "Oh, what a great idea!" but I wasn't writing it. Finally, I was talking with Mike Aronson, the editor who had published my last book, and after convincing me that I should publish it with him, he said "just sit down and write it." The problem was, I had only done a small amount of the research at that point. But I finally just sat down and started writing. I did the research chapter by chapter. I wrote the first chapter relatively late, but starting with the second chapter, I read everything I could read, I had students digging up stuff for me, I had my two computer screens. On one I would write pages and pages of notes, and on the other I would write the text. And when I finished drafting one chapter I would begin the research for the next one. I knew from the start what the whole scheme of the book was going to look like, but I didn't know what was going to go into each chapter until I did the research for it. One thing that had held me back at first was that deep down I had doubts about whether I was right. But the more I worked on it, the more evidence I assembled, the more I became convinced that I was right, that there really has been a change. So I became energized: I actually wrote the whole thing in a year and a half. But it probably took about six or seven years before that just to get to that point.

— *What about corporate people? What do they think about this idea? Do they agree?*

— I haven't had a huge number of reactions from businesspeople, but I have had some. One of the organizations that I discuss in the book is the Committee for Economic Development, which was a major player back in the 1940s and into the 1970s. And at one point I received a phone call from a former head of the CED telling me how much he was enjoying the book. We had a really good talk for about a half hour. At another point I published an article in the *Harvard Business Review Online* [Mizruchi 2013b] and I received a critical comment from a PR guy at the Business Roundtable, saying that my view of the Roundtable was "totally off-base," that the group was doing all kinds of great things to fix the political gridlock in Washington and that I should "come on down." I thought this was a great opportunity, so I wrote a very conciliatory response in which I said "thank you for your comments. I'd love to come on down." So we started corresponding. I sent them a copy of a book, and then I didn't hear anything. I wrote them a couple of months later, asking if they had received the book, and they asked me to send them another copy, and then I never heard from them after that either. This is a good case for organizational theory. One possible interpretation is that somebody was upset about the book and they didn't want to have anything to do with me. But another possible interpretation, which is probably

more likely, is that they are busy, they have a lot going on, they don't have time to be dealing with everything that comes into their mailbox, and my book just kind of "fell through the cracks." In terms of comments to the things I've written online, the response has actually been pretty positive. I've had some people, even business people, say "Yeah, this is kind of the way it was." And I spoke on the book at the Harvard Business School, and the old-timers there seemed to think that the business world had changed in the way that I'd described it.

— *But did they agree with the idea that the corporate elite became more fragmented?*

— The people I've spoken to who have been around for a long time seem to agree with that. I interviewed several businesspeople for the book and I kept them all anonymous. One person I spoke with, for example, knew Reginald Jones, who was the head of General Electric before Jack Welch, and he knew Jack Welch as well. And he said to me, and this was unprompted and unsolicited, that the heads of the big corporations are not as tight as they used to be, and they don't know each other as well. I had others tell me similar kinds of things. The data also seem to indicate this. One of our former graduate students, Johan Chu who is now just starting at the University of Chicago, has a fantastic graph where he shows the S & P 500 in 1997 and 2010, and you can see, with interlock ties, how the network is just breaking apart [Chu, Davis 2013]. So there is clearly evidence in that way.

— *Do you think that there are some global signs that the same is happening in other countries, like in Europe?*

— Oh yes, sure. There is evidence in the Netherlands. Eelke Heemskerk wrote a terrific book called *The Decline of the Corporate Community* [2007] about the Netherlands. There is evidence in Switzerland that Thomas David and his colleagues have assembled, and people have written about the UK. Germany is a little more controversial: there are some people who argue that a similar process has occurred and others are arguing that it hasn't. There does seem to be, certainly in Western Europe, some indication that something like this has occurred.

— *What about Asia? I always thought that Japan is going in the opposite direction.*

— It's interesting. We used to look at East Asia, Korea and Japan especially, and, more recently, China, as prototypes, because a lot of the American theories that didn't work so well in our companies worked really well in those East Asian countries. It was like "If only we had the keiretsu here!" But I don't know if there has been a long enough period to do analyses of those countries, to see if something similar is occurring. They are also at different stages historically, so it wouldn't entirely surprise me if we did not see a similar kind of fragmentation there. I'd like to find out, though.

— *I have a final section of questions, and they're about ICOS, actually. When I spoke to Dick Scott, he was telling me how organizational sociology developed at Stanford, and how those major approaches were developed, resource dependence, the new institutionalism, and population ecology mostly at Stanford. He's quite skeptical of what's going on at Stanford now, and I asked him what about the place where new theories are developing now. And he said that is, actually, Michigan is the new Stanford for organizational sociology. So, what is so exciting, about the institutional conditions of Michigan that made Dick Scott say that it's a new Stanford for organizational sociology?*

— Dick established a university-wide group at Stanford and ran it for many years. It was extremely successful but then it fell apart. There is a long history of organizational theory at Michigan. The entire Human Relations School was developed and flourished at Michigan in the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s. It was centered at ISR (the Institute for Social Research). And then it kind of died off. I think that approach kind of ran its course. By the early 1980s, Michigan had receded into the background in terms of a central place for organizational theory.

But then at the end of the decade — this was still before I arrived there — a group of people on campus, Mayer Zald, Michael Cohen, Rick Price, and Bob Kahn I think were the key players, decided that we needed to have a resurgence of organizational theory at Michigan. And they came up with this idea of setting up what they called the Interdisciplinary Committee on Organizational Studies (ICOS). They managed to convince various units on campus to fund it and they turned it into a weekly seminar series, with speakers, usually from outside. One reason it was successful was that the University of Michigan has always, dating back to the ISR days, been a very interdisciplinary university, it always fostered it. They never really were conscious about it; it just emerged organically from the nature of the university. Then a few years ago they realized that this was a great selling point, that we should push the fact that we are a very interdisciplinary university, and now they talk about it all the time. And I think what happened was, there were people all over campus who in one way or another were doing organizational work, and what ICOS did is they reached out to these people and brought them in. We discovered people all over the place doing interesting stuff, and then we would bring outside speakers. They would come to talk to the group and there would be all these fabulous people in the audience, and they'd go back home really impressed with how exciting and dynamic our environment was. And this was really exploding, just as the Stanford program was winding down. Dick has been one of our biggest supporters. He has been constantly saying, as you said, that Michigan is the new center of organizational theory. It was just a combination of things. There was no rival, so, it just developed. And then we made some really good hires. There was a really strong group of org people in the business school — Jane Dutton, Jim Walsh, Sue Ashford. We hired Wayne Baker and then Jerry Davis. And Mayer Zald and Michael Cohen played a major role in this. Both Mayer and Michael died within the past couple of years. They were both giants. Not only were these people great scholars, but they also were great administrators, they knew how to run an organization. They managed to get a really high level of funding that has sustained itself for about 25 years now, with no sign of disappearing. Now we've become institutionalized. I think it is a combination of really strong figures with great entrepreneurial and administrative skills, a gap in the larger environment, and the fact that there already was strength on campus that just hadn't really been tapped.

— *What are the main topics of the seminars?*

— Everything! That's one of the strengths, they will do anything. So, Jerry Davis, for example, has become interested in entrepreneurship, especially unconventional start-up firms. He's particularly interested in what's going on in Detroit, where there is a lot of very interesting entrepreneurship going on. One of his students, Suntae Kim, is doing his dissertation on a couple of incubators, workshops with several different entrepreneurs trying to start firms with alternative business models. He talks about it in terms of "anti-isomorphism," as they explicitly try to deviate from the conventional norms of how you start a new company. So Jerry has gotten very interested in that and he has brought people from all over, sometimes people I hadn't heard of, sometimes even entrepreneurs themselves, who are doing really interesting things.

— *That means, not only scholars are among the participants?*

— Sometimes, occasionally... There are almost always scholars, but ICOS also brought Bill McKibben last year when there was a unit on environmentalism. So, what Jerry does sometimes is, he will identify faculty members in the community here and say "Okay, you should have a unit this term and you can invite four people." So it depends on what people are interested in. Jerry is also interested in big data so he's got big data people coming in. We have also brought scholars from overseas occasionally, from Italy, Scandinavia, and other regions.

— *Thank you for sharing your thoughts on organizational sociology and for this interesting talk!*

Berkeley, September 29, 2014

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**Received:** January 19, 2015.

**Citation:** Conversation with Mark Mizruchi: “There is Very Little Organizational Theory Left in Sociology Departments”. *Journal of Economic Sociology = Ekonomicheskaya sotsiologiya*, vol. 16, no 2, pp. 110–118. Available at: <http://ecsoc.hse.ru/en/2015-16-2.html>