Chapter 12

Howard S. Becker: aspects of an open sociology

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Introduction

Howard Saul Becker was born in Chicago in 1928. He grew up in a Jewish family with a father arrived from Europe in his youth and who rose from a blue-collar industrial job to a small advertisement business. At the age of twelve Becker started to play the piano, teaching himself boogie-woogie by ear at the beginning, then taking lessons, learning to improvise on popular songs, and acquiring a taste for harmony and jazz arrangements. A few years later he started getting hired for weddings, bar-mitzvahs etc. Around eighteen, he played four or five nights a week in bars, taverns and strip clubs in town. After his graduation, he decided to do a master's thesis, mainly to please his father, who "was particularly unhappy that [he] spent most of [his] nights playing in bars" (Müller 2009: 15). Hesitating on what discipline he should chose, Becker enthusiastically read *Black Metropolis* (Drake and Clayton 1945), which convinces him to do urban anthropology. He went to the sociology department, where he hopes his life and work among dance musicians could be a good topic. Becker started to do fieldwork for a course with Ernest Burgess. After he showed Burgess his field notes on musicians, Burgess sent him to Everett C. Hughes, who worked on "occupations and professions" (Molotch 2012: 434).

Here starts the integration of Howard Becker to the "Chicago tradition" of innovation in sociology. From Robert Park to Everett Hughes, many authors presented in this book developed an intellectual style, a "sociological imagination", that matched Becker's. That environment gave him the opportunity to grow as one of the most singular scholars of his generation, and one of the most read sociologists in the world. Becker explained that his intellectual lineage came from "Simmel's way", defined as a work always in progress based on inductive analysis (Lu 2015: 128).

But his direct heritage is obviously Hughesian. Consider his casual writing style: plain English, asking simple questions, sometimes looking simplistic, but opening oneself up to huge sociological problems. Writing sociology in a way that can be read and understood by everyone is not only a formal choice but an epistemological, even political statement. He also shares Hughes's radical and somehow critical orientations, fundamental to symbolic interactionism, even if not always explicitly presented as such. That point of view addresses

and challenges the categories used in everyday life and in sociology, trying to understand how they are made and where they come from. Becker has pushed that constructivism in different ways, addressing such major issues as social rules and deviance, collective action in work situations, or sociological methods and epistemology.

Those three main domains give this chapter its structure in three core parts, each of them referring to one or two major books. The first part will address sociology of deviance and social rules, using the first book published by Becker, the worldwide classic *Outsiders* (1963). The second part will show how Becker should be fully considered as a sociologist of work, from his early years with E. C. Hughes, with whom he studied the work of medicine students and school teachers, but above all with his permanent questions on *Doing Things Together* (1986b) and especially his study of "artistic work", already in *Outsiders*, then in *Art Worlds* (1982). The third part of the chapter will deal with the sociological work itself, which Becker addressed in several texts and books, among the most important are *The Tricks of the Trade* (1998) and *Telling About Society* (2007). Finally, in the last and conclusive part, Becker's views on "Chicago interactionism" (Becker 1999) will be exposed, and his whole work will be depicted as the production of a genuinely independent scholar, referring mainly to his last books as *Do you know...?* (Faulkner and Becker 2009), *Thinking together* (Becker and Faulkner 2013) or *What About Mozart? What About Murder?* (Becker 2015).

The following pages about Howard S. Becker's work are different from a strictly exegetic point of view. Many things have been written on Becker and his work especially during the last decade. Beside his well-known academic publications, Becker has given in the last ten or fifteen years a large number of interviews in scientific journals in which he comments and explains his work and his life course. This material is precious to us because Becker has always seen sociological work as dynamic, and he is always ready to explain the construction and the evolution of his sociology over sixty years. Four of these interviews will be mainly quoted in the next pages: Müller 2009, Molotch 2012, Peretz, Pilmis and Vezinat 2015, and Lu 2015. I have had the chance to know Howie Becker for about ten years and have had many conversations with him, especially when he comes to Paris every year during fall. In addition to the published interviews mentioned above, I recorded our most recent discussion in autumn 2015 and we oriented it towards the present chapter.

Deviance and labelling theory: the tradition of heuristic transgression

The first major book of Howard S. Becker, *Outsiders*, was published in 1963 but assembled parts of his master's thesis and other fieldwork he did in the early 1950s. Surrounded by more theoretical papers, chapters 3 and 4 of the book deal with marijuana use and chapters 5 and 6

are about the culture and careers in a "deviant occupational group": dance musicians. In that first work, Becker is addressing the issues of social rules or norms and their transgression in a completely original way.

The context: moralists and functionalists

Giving up moralism and adopting transgressive points of view was deeply rooted in the Chicago tradition. It was the will of the Park and Thomas generation to meet the lumpen-proletariat, the immigrants, and gain their confidence to make fieldwork possible in the poor neighbourhoods. The idea was to soil your shoes in the slums and clean them on the carpets of the academic libraries. For Becker, as for his mentor Everett Hughes, there is no bad object, no filthy topic, and sociologists should be interested in the so called deviant or infamous behaviours without any judgement of value. As a dance musician, Becker gets familiar with marijuana smoking (he confirmed many times that he was a user, as in Gopnik 2015) and chose to study it. His work relies on premises radically opposed to common sense of the times (see the 1936 movie *Reefer Madness*): he thinks that drugs are a social fact, not for researchers to judge but for them to understand. Becker foresakes talking about drug abuse and talks about drug use, therefore admitting there is a recreational use of marijuana, and he tries to understand and explain how one gets into it. He takes seriously the activity of marijuana smoking and tries to explain by sequential analysis how one becomes a user, the different steps in the "career": learning the technique, learning to perceive the effects, learning to enjoy the effects. In the two following chapters, he deals with dance musicians, their culture and careers, marked by the tension between commercial and the anti-commercial postures and the disdain of musicians for non-musicians, the audience, the 'squares'. Once again, he offers no judgement or moral approach, just the analysis of how members of deviant social groups produce and share their own rules and norms.

Besides considerations about the dignity of the subject and related activities, in the scientific field of the 1940s and 1950s, deviance was a serious object for functionalist sociology. Robert Merton's deviance and anomy typology and classical truth table was a fixture:

		Institutional means	
		Accept	Reject
Cultural goals	Accept	***Conformity***	***Innovation (criminal)***
	Reject	***Ritualism (deviant)***	***Retreatism (deviant)***

New means	
New goals	***Rebellion (deviant)***

On a totally different basis, Becker develops a relational approach of deviance, based on the labelling theory. "When I wrote *Outsiders*, a long time ago, the established theory about deviance was Robert Merton's; everyone accepted it more or less. Some of us started to address that topic from a different point of view—I was not the only one—and over the years, that perspective became the new idea, which was still an old idea before it became the dominant idea on the topic. […] The idea of labelling theory […] is simple: the way people define a situation creates a reality, an idea usually attributed to W. I. Thomas in 1918. It is in fact the use of this idea in a new field where it had never been used that was new" (Müller 2009: 11). Becker proposed a radical alternative to Merton's typology, based on the relational dimension:

	Not perceived as deviant	Perceived as deviant
Obedient behaviour	***Conforming***	***Falsely accused***
Rule-breaking behaviour	***Secret deviant***	***Pure deviant***

The relational point of view Becker adopted to analyse deviance broke with the idea that some actions or even some people are deviant by nature. It is the look of the majority rule-obeying on the one who is seen and labelled as a rule-breaker that makes him become an "outsider". But Becker shows also that outsiders tend to gather in social groups (homosexuals and drug users were contemporary examples) which develop their own systems of values and for whom the opinion of the majority group is biased. "The rulebreaker may feel his judges are 'outsiders'" (Becker 1963: 2). Specialists of law and public health resisted his views at first, but Becker often likes to remember how those questions are relative to a context: in the 1950s, his research looked at best irrelevant and at worst irresponsible, banalising inacceptable behaviour from the lower classes. In the 1970s, when a large proportion of the students on American campuses were smoking marijuana, Becker became suddenly relevant.

Studying social transgression the way Becker did was a sociological transgression, but it was also a heuristic choice and had a deep impact on how transgression and transgressors could be seen. Along with Erving Goffman's work on a psychiatric institution (Goffman 1961), the sociological work of those "second Chicago school" scholars contributed to change the social perception of "normality" and "deviance."

Relativism?

Saying that "deviance is a judgement more than a fact" (Peretz, Pilmis and Vezinat 2015), Becker is sometimes accused to be a radical cultural relativist, for whom no behaviour or

action would be “bad” by nature. The usual objection is “what about murder?” and gives the first half of the title of Becker’s most recent book (Becker 2015). Isn’t murder a deviant act any way you take it? In fact, it depends on how you define it. If murder is one people killing another, then many murders are not seen as “bad” by the majority: executions in countries that still have the death penalty (Saudi Arabia or United States for instance), honour killing in many parts of the world, or of course war and police operations, are “acceptable” situations where one people kills another, but legitimately. If you define murder as one people killing another without legitimacy, that is, without agreement of the majority, you come back to a relational definition.

What is interesting for Howard Becker is definitively not to decide if this or that is “good” or “bad” by nature, but to understand how a group decides it is. A first example has been given above with “murder” as a specific category of action. Another example, this time of social construction of objects: Becker has written several texts asking, “what is a drug ?” (Becker 1973 ; 2001), showing here again that many psychotropic products more or less addictive are legally consumed in Western countries when other products with the same objective characteristics are forbidden. The question is not to decide if alcohol or Valium is “better” or “worse”, or more dangerous than marijuana or cocaine, but to see how some products have been accepted by the majority and some others did not. What kind of interests were involved? What kind of discourse were produced? What kind of representations and behaviours associated with one product or another did emerge, how? How have they evolved till now? etc.

A last example, this time concerning people, with the concept of “career”. Several authors developed this central concept in interactionism (Hughes 1971, Becker 1963, Goffman 1961, Strauss 1971), and it covers a broader range than the common-sense word which is just relative to occupational life. Hughes started from that usual meaning but extended it in showing how it was important to embrace the whole life course of a person, its occupational and private aspects, notably the evolution of health and physical capacities. Erving Goffman applied it to “the progressive changes that occur in the beliefs that he has concerning himself and significant others” (Goffman 1961: 119) to define “moral career”, and Becker wrote on careers of musicians but also on careers of marijuana smokers. The common approach those authors shared is the concept of career and sequential analysis permits to articulate the objectivity of the standard positions through which everyone passes and the subjectivity of each in that common path. That concept of career is a major tool to analyse the construction of social roles in the life course or in certain specific behaviour (for instance,

Darmon speaks about "anorexic career", Darmon 2003). Once again, that kind of constructivist approach is breaking up with static naturalisation of people or activities.

Becker's sociology is more constructivist than relativist, at least compared to the 'flat' relativism of some postmodernist literature, because there is a critical dimension in the issue of the social construction of categories: those categories carry with them the social issues which produced them, including social inequalities and power.

The question of power: who imposes the rules and whose side are we on?

Power, social inequalities, and domination issues are sometimes called a blind spot in symbolic interactionism. Goffman's (1961) work on total institutions is clearly denying such an allegation, as is the attentive reading of many Hughes' papers collected in *The sociological eye* (Hughes 1971). Becker, like Goffman, inherited from Hughes a serious view of such issues (Cartier 2005). Even if they do not shape the whole research, they are always taken as basic data underlying interactionist analysis (this is probably less the case with other authors getting closer to ethnomethodology), at least implicitly.

But sometimes Becker puts it front and centre. He does in his PhD work on schoolteachers in Chicago where he studies how they categorise their pupils by their perception of social class and adapt their pedagogical approach (Becker 1952). For instance, they will demand less schoolwork of working-class pupils because of their "lack of motivation" and expect more disturbances due to their "bad manners". The result is a reinforcement of class culture, despite the egalitarianist principles of the educational system. It is also the case in the eighth chapter of *Outsiders* on "moral entrepreneurs", rule creators and rule enforcers. Quoting Joseph Gusfield (1955), Becker points to the link between the attitude of the "crusaders" (rule creators) and their dominant social position: "As Gusfield says, 'Moral reformism of this type suggests the approach of a dominant class toward those less favorably situated in the economic and social structure'. Moral crusaders typically want to help those beneath them to achieve a better status. That those beneath them do not always like the means proposed for their salvation is another matter. But this fact—that moral crusades are typically dominated by those in the upper levels of the social structure—means that they add to the power they derive from the legitimacy of their moral position, the power they derive from their superior position in society" (Becker 1963: 149).

Another article from the 1960s is even more explicit. In a text entitled "Whose side are we on?", published in *Social Problems* in 1967, Becker addresses the "hierarchy of credibilities" which makes any "well socialized member of our society", including sociologists, give more credit to the "superordinate" than to the "subordinate" and which

implies a bias in any so-called "neutral" position. "The question is not wether we should take sides, since we inevitably will, but rather whose side we are on" (Becker, 1967: 239). In an academic environment which is depicted as very conservative, Becker's claim for banning our "unthinkinng acceptance of the hierarchy of credibilities" is clearly a critical statement and looks like Bourdieu's promotion of "participant objectivation" in order to take distance from the *doxa*, the dominant ideology that most of us share unconsciously and leads us to see from the dominant – superordinate point of view (Bourdieu 2003). Eventually, for Becker, we have to be conscious that we always take sides, and that sound empirical work will be the best guarantee for unbiased research: "our problem is to make sure that, whatever point of view we take, our research meets the standards of good scientific work, that our unavoidable sympathies do not render our results invalid" (Becker 1967: 246).

So the sociological work of Howard Becker is definitely not "class-blind", ignorant or uninterested in social inequalities. The interactions are always situated in a social context where gender, "race", and class matter, and if Becker, as most of his interactionist colleagues, rarely emphases that aspect in his texts, he is perfectly aware of the importance of those elements in the establishment of conventions and shared comprehension in social worlds.

Worlds and work: doing things together

As I already had the opportunity to write (Perrenoud 2013), Howard Becker should be considered a sociologist of work. From his learning years with Everett Hughes (Becker, Geer, Hughes and Strauss 1961) to his mature opus *Art Worlds* (1982) or the recent *Do you know?* (Faulkner and Becker 2009), Becker has always been fascinated by the way people are "doing things together" (Becker 1986b).

In Everett Hughes' footsteps

Sociology of work in the 1950s was still marked by the pioneer studies of Elton Mayo at the Western Electric and in Europe by a Marxist trend. One way or another, those studies always made their protagonist a male blue-collar. On an other side, the sociology of professions was interested in lawyers and doctors: "In US sociology, there was a special relation between professions and functionalism. Talcott Parsons thought there were fundamental problems and fundamental deep values, and that professions embodied those higher ideals, the values of the society. It was important matters like medicine, body and health. It wasn't his research conclusion. It was a conviction" (Peretz, Pilmis, and Vezinat 2015: 3).

Hughes was among the first (with Sutherland 1937) to promote another way of thinking about professions. The question was not which occupation was worth the status of

profession and which was not, just as for deviant acts it was not a matter of the "nature" of activities. "For me and my colleagues, like Eliot Freidson, professions were social conventions which allowed some people well organised in their work to have more autonomy, the power to do what they want. But musicians in the bars have no choice but to play what the owner of the joint wants. They can't say 'No, I represent the musical ideals of our society', they play what is asked. To me profession is just one piece of the big ensemble of sociology of work". (Peretz, Pilmis, and Vezinat 2015: 3). Becker (1962) published a paper on professions explaining that trying to define what is "in substance" a profession does not make sense, but that we have to understand what issues underlie that category, that status, the interests of members of different occupational groups and strategies to legitimise their jobs.

We find here again the constructivist approach: any profession, job, occupation, is a bundle of tasks submitted to variations in time and space. That dynamic concept permits to contextualise objects. Once the idea of the specific "nature" of a profession is gone, heuristic comparisons become possible. Once again Hughes uses transgressive comparisons as a heuristic tool: "Hughes' methodological principle was anything you see in a lowly occupation is probably going on in a higher-status occupation, only they won't tell you" (Molotch 2012: 434). So it is very important for Hughes to study ordinary occupations, not high-level professions nor blue collar jobs, but service work, wherein men and women interact with colleagues, hierarchy, and many clients of different types. That remarkable innovation stresses the relational dimension in work situations and will lead Hughes to the concept of "social drama of work" (1976). The fact that Becker was studying ordinary musicians, not celebrities, was crucial for Hughes and drew him to supervise Becker's work (and his work on schoolteachers as well as Gold's study of janitors, Gold 1952). The concept (perhaps more than Goffman's theatrical metaphor and study of the service relationship in *Asylums*) will always mark Becker's work. Any work situation is a play in which everyone has a role to perform, following a script which is unwritten, but known to all.

Shared comprehension in social worlds

Like Hughes, Becker often compares very different occupational contexts, like for instance music, cooking, and surgery, all of which are places of a shared comprehension, necessary for coordinated action. Being a part of those 'worlds' means sharing conventions with the other actors of the world about what to do, how, and when, what is the right way to proceed and what are mistakes, and about the role each one has to play.

Anselm Strauss (1991) developed and precisely defined the concept of social world but Becker uses it more informally: "'World', the way I used it in *Art worlds*, is not a thing,

an entity. It's a way of thinking about social life. The basic idea is that everything that happens is the result of what a large number of people do. Nothing happens as the result of one person's act, because that person's act depend on the acts of many other people, and all these people are paying attention to each other, seeing what other people are doing and thinking of how what all those other people are doing will affect what *I* want to do, and then changing what you're doing in order to take account of what those other people are doing". (Lu 95: 137).

The work of a chef, even if his name is on the restaurant's sign, depends on many people. There are those who work directly with him in the kitchen and with whom an excellent coordination is necessary, in function of what he wants and how he wants them to work but also in function of their skills and specialties. But there are also others who are not in the kitchen but whose work is: farmers or fishermen, suppliers, carriers. Those who grow, stock, and carry tomatoes, properly or not, adapt to the demand of the cooks; cooks also must adapt to the constraints of growing, stocking, and moving that special variety of tomato requested by the chef, which is delicious but very fragile. Near the kitchen, waiters must also coordinate with the cooks to have plates out at the right time and to know what to suggest to customers today. The customers also have their role as in the unwritten script, adjusting their behaviour to the type of restaurant, estimating what is possible, likeable, or forbidden to wear or say in function of who they are and what is the place ("Should I send back that meat which is a bit too cooked"?). And there may be still others, like competing restaurants in town, sanitary and tax inspectors, and perhaps even the makers of TV shows like *Ramsay's Kitchen Nightmares.*

That conception of work in worlds has been the most completely developed by Becker in *Art Worlds* (1982), a major book which renews as well the perspectives in sociology of art.

The equation art = work

During the 1960s and the 1970s, Becker got more and more interested in sociology of art. He was stimulated by the great study on French painting world and networks in the 19th century published by Harrison and Cynthia Whyte (Whyte and Whyte 1965) and fascinated by Raymonde Moulin's work—he learned French to read it—on the French painting market showing the prominent role of intermediates, critics, and galleries (Moulin 1967). Becker thinks that "art could be a good model for how society in general works, because it involves a lot of people acting together and making, in spite of their differences of position, power, ideology, etc., something that some other participant recognises and accepts as art. Which might be a good model […] for how other people act together to cure sick people, or to make

automobiles, or to make a family unit or a kinship system, etc." (Lu 2015: 134-135). In *Art worlds*, Becker obviously gives up the romantic representation of the artist as a singular and solitary creator. Art is a collective action, a good case of "doing things together" in worlds of shared comprehension, that is generally the main point to be remembered in *Art Worlds*.

But to get to that point Becker also had to give up the "reflect" theory, which still dominated art sociology in the 1960s and 1970s. It was interested in great artworks as a meaningful reflection of socio-historical situations. Becker decides to study not only the masterpieces, the major artworks from the big names, but also and overall the humble productions, the anonymous, the ordinary. Here we recognise the Hughes trend to heuristic transgressive comparisons: observing the "humble" to know better the "proud" (Hughes 1971). And indeed, everything that seems granted in a big concert hall with a symphonic orchestra will appear much more problematic in a blues-rock gig in a bar. Where do the musicians play (there is no stage)? Where do they stay when they don't (there is no backstage)? Do they have a work contract? Who is negotiating for that? Who is taking in charge the sound system and the lights (are there lights)? In the joint, some people are talking loud, others are listening, some are requesting a tune, how to react? It would have the same effect to compare a museum with a collection of classical painting to a private garden full of the sculptures of the owner. Comparison of cases as different as possible reveals the features that were both obvious and invisible because they were taken for granted.

From those observations, Becker proposes also a relational typology of artists in function of their integration to art worlds. Becker distinguishes four big types of artists: *integrated professionals* who know and "use the conventions on which their world runs" (Becker 1982: 129), *mavericks* who give up the formal conventions of their art world (like Charles Ives, who composed music for a thousand violins and never heard his work performed), *folk artists* whose activity is adjusted to the conventions of local communities, not professional art worlds (like country women who make quilts in the United States) and *naïve artists* whose work is "made without reference to the standards of any world outside its maker's personal life" (like the "Palais ideal", "a complex of buildings, reliefs and sculptures"—Becker 1982: 263—the French Ferdinand Cheval built during thirty years). That typology covers all the range of the relations to art worlds (intermediates, market, audiences) and once again "the comparison shows us how things that seem ordinary in the making of professional art need not be that way at all, how art could be made differently, and what the results of doing it differently would be".

World and field, Becker and Bourdieu

Art Worlds proposes a paradigm in sociology of art (and beyond) which is often opposed to another famous one: the Bourdieusian "field" (Bourdieu 1980). Much has been written on that topic (especially Becker and Pessin 2006), but to end that part of this chapter on Howard Becker's work, that so-called opposition seems interesting to discuss.

Becker's worlds are mostly collaborative when Pierre Bourdieu's fields are agonistic spaces where agents are positioned and ranked, more or less dominated or dominant, in struggle for domination. It is sometimes said that Bourdieu's model is a zero-sum game and Becker's a positive sum game, that Bourdieu's sociology is gloomily determinist, only interested in structural domination, while Becker's is inspiring (it is the common opinion of many French sociologists who discovered Becker in the early 1990s—he was translated in the late 1980s—and found in his work an anti-Bourdieu weapon of mass destruction).

Both of the concepts of world and field are constructivists and both are relational, based on relations between people, groups or institutions in a social space referring to a certain type of activity (the word and the field of literature, for example, with authors, critics, and publishers). So the concepts of field and world are close enough to be compared, opposed but also combined, which would be more difficult for instance with Frankfurtian critical theory of culture or radical ethnomethodology. This chapter has showed that Becker, like many interactionists, is largely aware of the logics of domination between social groups, even if he doesn't place it at the centre of his work as Bourdieu does. But the difference between them is not the same fundamental opposition than with functionalists on "deviance" or "professions": "I don't even think there is a conflict between Bourdieu and me; I think it's simply another way of thinking" says Becker (Peretz, Pilmis and Vezinat 2015). Indeed, each of the authors has built his own system, but the next generations shouldn't fear to use both of them to analyse social spaces as worlds *and* fields.

The trade and the craft: epistemology of the social sciences

The last major aspect of Howard Becker's sociology presented here is epistemological reflection. Working with Hughes probably encouraged Becker in developing original and even transgressive conceptions of the sociological work, and he cultivates that habit since then in books such as *Sociological Work: Method and Substance* (1970), *Writing for Social Scientists* (1986a), *Tricks of the Trade* (1998), *Telling About Society* (2007) or very recently *What About Mozart? What About Murder? Reasoning from cases* (2015).

The question of "theory"

Howard Becker's sociology has often been seen as a *craft*, even by him, referring to the practical dimension of fieldwork: observing and meeting people. This is the core of the job for Becker: "I'm interested in theories that help me ask questions, that suggest areas where we can fruitfully spend our time looking for how things work, what kinds of social arrangements exist and what kinds of results they produce. To put it more negatively, I'm not interested in what people sometimes seem to mean when they use the term 'theory' today: a sort of propositional, axiomatic, logical structure from which we can deduce what might be called 'theorems' that we can then test in empirical research and so add to some structure of scientific theory that will resemble what some people imagine is embodied by theories in the field of physics. For me, asking questions about how the social world works does not mean testing hypotheses deduced from a general theory. Instead it means finding new problems that I hadn't imagined, new aspects of that world I haven't imagined, new ways of thinking about the phenomena of everyday life wherever it occurs. We find things like that by looking closely and intensely at things. For sociologists that means observing social life in action, people doing things together (to use a formula that seems useful to me), and trying to avoid and escape from the conventional ways about whatever phenomenon we are observing at the time. When we look at social life that way, we see all sorts of things that we ordinarily ignore, and that's where we start making new theory" (Lu 2012:128).

Becker stands for an inductive approach and believes that fieldwork must drive theoretical reflection, not the opposite. He encourages students petrified by the importance of "theory" and the difficulty of matching it with the empirical data to write everything they know about their field, reminding them they are its best specialists (Becker 1986a, 2007), which recalls some of the original principles of grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss 1967).

Another famous "trick of the trade" (Becker 1998) goes in the same direction of humble and sound empirical work as a pragmatic recommendation from Becker to younger scholars. The idea is to shift from asking "why" to asking "how". It works as well for the question the sociologist asks to himself as for the questions he asks to the actors on the field. For Becker, "why" is both very ambiguous and perplexing, and can lead to reductive answers, especially obtuse determinism. He says: "Some people think it's metaphysically necessary to say why something happened. […] I don't think anything has to happen one way or another. I think things end up happening because there's so much play in what's going on…" (Molotch 2012:428-429). Asking "how" is a way of keeping open to the "play", of describing and understanding social process including the coincidence or the unexpected.

The epistemology of social sciences Becker proposes is empiricist. He stands for a sociology close to the actors, not to "account their accounts" (as Bourdieu sometimes mocked ethnomethodology), but to avoid massive bias in research.

Avoiding scholastic and bureaucratic bias

Becker often stresses the importance of social scientists to socialise with non-academics. Too many sociologists, in Europe and maybe more in the USA, never get out of the campus and develop a very partial vision of a society in which they don't really live any longer. They tend to go for "fancy theorising" and for academic argument, forgetting that "the more you spend time with people who do another job, film makers, actors, mathematicians, biologists, specialists of volcanos, the better, because it opens your mind, it leads us to other points of view" (Müller 2009:13)

But the university world has risks beyond theoretical guerrillas and academic resentments isn't the only risk. In our times of modern scientific management, Becker has become sharp critic of the academic system. "I have no regrets. I would simply say that I'm happy not to work in universities anymore, because I think they have changed in a way I wouldn't like very much. It's becoming way too bureaucratic, too concerned by control".

"And money?" asks Müller.

"Yes. These aren't really happy times. When I say that I'm born in the good times, it means also that for me, when I was ready for professional life there was a lot of financial support for the kind of work that I liked and without all that bureaucracy; I have been very lucky to be on the right place at the right time. Looking back today, it looks like a golden age' (Müller 2009:16). Becker's position is clearly expressed in a paper he published in the left-wing French monthly journal *Le Monde diplomatique* under the title "When researchers don't dare to do research any longer" ("Quand les chercheurs n'osent plus chercher", Becker 2011). Becker tackled the lack of political courage of many scientific journals and a kind of academic censorship which still limits the chances of transgressive studies to be published and publicised. But most of all, he condemned resolutely the contemporary trend of social sciences management, especially in the USA, to imitate natural sciences' policy about human subject research. His short text is a plea for fieldwork in social sciences, which is under a real bureaucratic menace due to the generalisation of the obligation to inform anybody involved in a "survey" and get their consent, which means simply the death of ethnographic observation, particularly in large groups.

Telling about society

As that bureaucratisation threatens official academic sociology, Becker shows in *Telling About Society* (2007) that academic sociologists don't have the monopoly of social analysis and should take a closer look at other types of representations of the society to better understand their own work. In his familiar intellectual and writing style—spontaneous, always curious, and refusing any established boundary—Becker maps out the very diverse ways of representing the social world, from city maps to photographs, from statistical tables to literature. There are many ways to talk about society and even if many of those ways aren't "official" sociology, they are precious for us because they give us different representations of the social world, each involving an ensemble of conventions, bonding "makers" and "users" in an interpretive community (back to the concept of "world"). Each way of talking about society has its specificities, its qualities and its blind spots, and social scientists should know better and think more about their peculiar ways of representing the social world: "The social scientist's unambiguous concepts produce unambiguous results. The literary description trades clarity and unidimensionality for the ability to make multiple analyses of the multiple possibilities contained in one story" (Becker 2007:284).

That sounds like an appeal to cultural open-mindedness, to curiosity for any kind of representation of the social life. And that is also the statement of someone whose life has always been marked by arts and culture. As a child, Becker went with his father on Sunday mornings to the Chicago Art Institute and spent hours watching Impressionists and other modern painters. He plays the piano, played it professionally, and he is a remarkable connoisseur of American popular songs, classical jazz, or romantic symphonic and chamber music. He is married to the photographer Dianne Hagaman, and did a lot of photography himself (at first he wanted to have a personal experience in a form of visual arts, as he had "never been able to draw well or, really, at all"—Lu 2015:148). As Becker said, "Art has always been part of my life" (Lu 2015:148). In the 1990s, he grew fascinated by experimental forms of literature, from the sociological (and autobiographical, and formally constraint) novels and texts of Georges Perec as *Les choses*, *Tentative d'épuisement d'un lieu parisien*, *La disparition* or *La vie mode d'emploi* (Becker 2003), to hypertext fiction (Becker 1995). He developed a keen interest in "the new media" (Becker 2002) and the new possibilities offered by the Internet, which led him to publish with his great friend Robert R. Faulkner (sociologist and trumpet player) the whole e-mail exchange they had to prepare their book on "doing music together", *Do you know?... the jazz repertoire in action* (Faulkner and Becker 2009). As part of the contemporary art project "Formes de vie", by Franck Lebovici in Paris, those two hundred and more e-mails have been published in the chronological order they were written (Becker and Faulkner 2013), allowing the reader to access the whole process of

discussion, digressions, hesitations, dead-ends, jokes, and cursing. The result is an exceptional sociological and literary document, rough, intense, funny, and intellectually captivating.

Conclusion

Today, Howard S. Becker is celebrated in many countries as a major influence in social sciences. His work had an impact on numerous fields such as education, public health, arts and culture, and industrial relations. His books have always pleased students, with his spontaneous style and his transgressive topics and views. Recently, the long interview he gave to Adam Gopnik for *The New Yorker* (Gopnik 2015) caused an unexpected new wave of solicitations from journalists and young scholars in Europe and in the US. In his most recent work (Faulkner and Becker 2009, Becker and Faulkner 2013, or Becker 2015), Becker is developing his provocative style, talking more freely than ever about sociology and academic world. *Thinking together* (Becker and Faulkner 2013), as mentioned above, is particularly interesting from that point of view. Of course, Becker knows his freedom of speech and sometimes radical or iconoclast considerations on contemporary sociology are legitimate and readable or audible because of his position in the field (to speak like Bourdieu). He is the last representative of a great generation alongside Erving Goffman, Anselm Strauss or Raymond Gold, trained by Hughes, Blumer, and others, whose careers covered the entire second half of the twentieth century and established interactionism as one of the major paradigms in social sciences.

Though, beyond that canonical, coherent, historical vision, Becker has always been reluctant to the myth of a unified Chicago School tradition and its consistency from the urban ecology of the1920s through the symbolic interactionism of the 1960s. Howard Becker is a radical constructivist and his preventions against what he sometimes sees as artificial theorisation leads him to question permanently the relevance of an interpretation in terms of "school of thought". In an article published in 1999 called "The Chicago School, So-Called", he explicitly addresses that issue and explains how it really happened: "If you imagine that students of the generation I belonged to were passive recipients of a great coherent tradition of Chicago symbolic interactionism, then, you are quite mistaken" (Becker, 1999:8). In that short but particularly enlightening paper, Becker depicts "the real Chicago on 59th Street in the Social Science Building as opposed to the Chicago of the origin myth". He describes the variety of influences and positions among the scholars who were teaching, reminding us that William Ogburn ("the greatest single proponent of quantitative work during those years, perhaps in the entire history of sociology" Becker 1967:5) joined Park and Burgess in the 1930s, and that Burgess and him were insisting on the importance of statistics in social

research. Then came Louis Wirth, Robert Redfield, the demographer Philip Hauser or the unjustly forgotten W. Loyd Warner, whose "lineage had nothing to do with the Chicago school, but was classically anthropological, traceable back through Radcliffe-Brown to Durkheim" (Becker 1999:6). He shows the dissentions among some of those now seen as "the Chicagoans", even between "the students of Park and Burgess from the first Golden Age" (for instance "Hughes and Blumer […] had very low opinions of one another"). Becker takes from Samuel Gilmore the fundamental distinction between a "school of thought" and a "school of activity" (Gilmore, 1988) and explains that Chicago was more the second than the first, "a vigorous an energetic school of activity, a group of sociologists who collaborated in the day-to-day work of making sociology in an American university and did it very well" (Becker 1999:10).

That is precisely because Becker explains that Chicago wasn't the unified school of thought that many think it was, that he *is* an interactionist. Becker refuses the legend, the myth, even if it's coherent, even if the story is great, and he faces the reality and its complexity, its contradictions, the way it was historically and relationally shaped, in a dynamic and constructivist approach based on fieldwork, and it eventually appears to be far more interesting than the great story. In his interactionist perspective, Becker is permanently questionning the consistency of the big theoretical ensembles, even "symbolic interactionism". He always says or writes that one author or another is "usually considered as an interactionnist" but he never sees it as an absolute, essential, definition. Once again these are dynamic and relational matters. Becker ends the article coming back to Hughes: "The real legacy of Chicago is the mixture of things that characterized the school of activity at every period: open, whether through choice or necessity, to a variety of way of doing sociology, eclectic because circumstances pushed it to be. I think, and not just because I was his student, that Hughes was – in that sense – the true Chicagoan, the real descendant of Park, the sociologist who was skeptical of every way of doing social science, including his own" (Becker 1999:10).

Among the interactionist authors and in sociology in general, what will remain of Howard Becker's work? Doubtless he will leave us some crucial ideas on the construction of social categories and rules, on shared comprehension, collective action and conventions in social worlds, on art as a collective work involving much more than "artists", and on sociology as one way among others to "tell about society". Those notions come from a constantly relational thought, a dynamic vision of social interactions always shaping and remodelling social reality. Some of those important ideas follow paths opened by his masters, some take parallel lanes to his colleagues, but most of those advances in social sciences are

today largely integrated by large numbers of scholars and students along with Goffman's work, Bourdieu's, Sennett's, or Giddens' as contemporary classics. In its relation to social sciences, Becker's work is a perpetual advocacy of sound empirical research, it's the refutation of philosophical speculation and of an "inspired" or "enchanted" sociology, but also the defiance of academic constraints, the quiet insubordination to bureaucracy and the open-mindedness to other forms of "telling about society". Howie Becker started to do sociology as a hobby when he was a musician, and maybe he made such a career in social sciences because he never saw that job like a field of battle in which he would kill or be killed. That gave him a real distance to academic disputes and issues that rule many of our lives.

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