

Howard Becker: A Sociologist between Worlds and Eras

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Abstract

Howard Becker, one of the most influential and revered sociologists of our time, died on August 16, 2023. His theorizing and methods for doing research have influenced three generations of researchers. He began as an outsider in the field, yet drew people to his approach. This essay is a tribute to his memory.

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“...chance often gives us better results than the most careful planning.”
— Howard Becker, *Here and There: A Collection of Writings*, 2022, p. 151.

I never met Howard Becker. I wish I had.

I've taught his *Art Worlds* for several years. I've read and recommended his work on writing and methodology to my students. I've felt at home in San Francisco, been told I'd love Paris. Becker savored his fall and winter years by seasonally migrating between liberal, foggy SF, and the City of Light—“...a longing you didn't know you had until it was answered.”¹ Model for a scholarly life well-lived by a soft-spoken cool iconoclast. An American in Paris. Sociologist from a long-gone era who kept publishing and engaging with ideas well into his silver years. *Sui generis*.

In an article in *The New Yorker* Adam Gopnik (2015) argues that at the beginning of the second millennium a “second act of Becker's career began” in France. The collective action by a group of scholars, L'École de Chicago, contributed to spreading Becker's ideas. His colloquial prose might have factored in. Listening to his words resonating in your head sounds like a friend talking, a friend who tells a good story infused with quirky remarks that may cause you to chuckle. Or pause. And think again. But Becker also sounds like an old established professor asking you to question conventions. Why should a manuscript have an early section titled “Plan of the Book”? What's “the literature,” anyway? What counts, can count, as data? And what is, or can be, sociology? Is Robert Frank's *The Americans* sociology? What about Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities*? Becker said so. Could it be true? Foundational questions, if you ask me. Reflections one is either too embedded in a field to ask, too afraid, or too dull to ponder. His writings provide an antidote, or least an alternative, to French-style intellectualism. As Existentialism teaches us, we are free to choose and this realization may help us lead a more authentic life. We are our choices. But our choices often depend on what we've been exposed to, and thus can see (Becker, 2022, p. 151). Imagination plays out through inner speech, consists of an assemblage of varying viewpoints. Mental simulations which “help us gauge the consequences of different courses of action” (...) we integrate and edit into story lines as “narratives with alternate endings” (Corte, 2022, p. 168).

Alain Pessin's classic interview with Becker contrasts his idea of “world” with Pierre Bourdieu's concept of “field” (Becker & Pessin, 2006). Some might argue that Bourdieu's ideas are more complex, more sophisticated. But others could add that complexity of thought doesn't necessarily demand intricate prose, a point that has been made, and made tangible, by Randall Collins (2019). It's a cliché that, magisterial as it is, *La Distinction* would have been better had it been edited more carefully. Shorter, too. Could it have been more influential? Could be.

Becker's approach represents a quintessential North American trait: a pragmatic *modus operandi* sparked by naïveté in the best sense of the word: openness to try find your own way, a new angle. To experiment. No need for sound engineers. Just go out and do it. Do some homework. But don't overthink it. Practice may make perfect. Or make do. While society's pillars were set long before you were born, you shouldn't forget that “the monopoly is almost never complete and certainly never permanent.” And besides, “you can always do something else” (Becker & Pessin, 2006, pp. 278–279)—or at least try to, granted you can persuade others to help.

A jazz pianist who reluctantly pursued an academic career, Becker knew about tempo and improvisation. And about how to work with a note badly played. Or how to tweak a song

1. This quote is from the 1951 trailer of the musical romantic comedy *An American in Paris*, written by Alan Jay Lerner.

he'd played for the nth time. "Accidents to innovate with", as Eitan Wilf (2023) would say. Becker's advice on writing can be summarized by realizing that "while you have already begun your project in your head, you need to put words on paper, and then keep on; you should always change them later anyway." Or, as Bill Germano (2021) puts it, "writing is rewriting." Give me a cue. We start from there. What's next? "Yes, and..."

How to explain Becker's greatness? Distance, an active participation in avocations beyond the academy; original academic training by masters like Everett Hughes; informal lessons learned by reading *The New Yorker* and writers like Mark Twain and New Journalists like John McPhee. And? His timing in entering the profession certainly contributed to his own *habitus*, stance, and success. Some of it luck, but also will and deed. A pursued luck? Pessin calls it "the sociology of the possible" (Becker & Pessin, 2006). Becker responds that it's a sociology of real people, doing things together while trying to align different interests and working with the resources at hand, creating something none could have produced alone. Or would they have worked with someone else, in a different place, would have resulted in something else. I say it's a sociology of collective creativity broadly defined. A sociology grounded in George Herbert Mead's ideas on "uncertainty, contingency, and transformation" (Blumer, 1966, p. 541). A sociology in which groups build and modify societal structures from the bottom up through a process of interpretation, mutual adjustment, and chance. Or, as Gary Alan Fine (2012) calls it, "a local sociology" of groups.

Michael Farrell's stage-theory of *collaborative circles* (2001) explains how creative work entails two interrelated processes: production and collective action. And that is, mobilization to win acceptance for a creative vision (phase 4). As a stage-theory derived by comparing different cases of creative groups, Farrell's theory conforms to Becker's ideas on "career and process" and with the value of comparative research (2008, pp. xi–xii).

One of Farrell's case studies (2001) was formed and developed in Paris. Writing about the French Impressionists, Farrell describes how Frédéric Bazille, Auguste Renoir, Alfred Sisley, and Claude Monet first met in the art studio of Charles Gleyre, a peripheral art teacher who tolerated different painting styles.

Despite living in Paris, center of the French art world, each of these young artists operated on the outskirts of its network of famed painters. Marginality, and a desire to find their footing, drove them to join forces, to start to socialize one another into their discipline. Increasing trust through self-disclosures led to idealization, rejection of dominant norms, and experimentation. It also infused them with a desire to keep pace of one another, especially within the group's dyads.

Between 1748 and 1870s, entry into an artistic career was determined by exhibiting work at the *Salon de Paris*, the official exhibition of the Académie des Beaux-Arts. Fourteen judges admitted or rejected submissions. Those gatekeepers veered towards preserving the *status quo*, the *doxa* constituted by three accepted styles: Romanticism, Classicism, and Realism. They favored artists linked to one another via networks determined by social and cultural capital, nepotism, and self-interest. All these factors contributed to the reproduction of the old. Old ideas within century-old hierarchies.

The young Impressionists learned through trial and error that they couldn't win within the field's rules. Rebelling against authority led to searching for a distinctive creative vision (Farrell's stages 2 and 3). "Us against them" on a mission, as organizational scholars Warren Bennis and Patricia Biederman (2007) would say.

While it took the Impressionists ten years to develop their vision, their innovative way of capturing the flickering light of the instance through fast, short, "commalike brushstrokes"

(Farrell, 2001, p. 40) to represent the day's changing light, was integrated into a coherent style in 1869. During that pivotal summer the group split into two dyads and made independent but correlative and complementary discoveries. When they reconvened with the group in the Fall, they collectively reworked what each had learned in pairs.

The idea to stop trying to win acceptance of the Salon's jury, and to "DIY" their exhibition paved the way for success. "Forming a cooperative to exhibit and sell their works" through a series of exhibitions also depended on winning the favor of critics and the public (Farrell, 2001, p. 57). While the first shows resulted in much coverage by critics (Galenson & Jensen, 2002, p. 26), they also resulted in derision and mockery, infusing conflicts within the group (Farrell, 2001, p. 59). A reviewer of the first show in 1874 noted that the paintings looked unfinished. Didn't look realistic. Through a satirical scene in which one of the painters would be defending himself against a critic, he wrote: "Yes, but the impression is there" (p. 59).² By the third show, "the group had adopted the name ['Impressionists'] themselves" (p. 59), as if to say, "Thanks for the labeling. Clever. We'll use it." Quite punk-rock, if you ask me.

Until the Impressionists' first show in 1874, to be recognized as a professional artist depended on being admitted to the Salon and securing accolades by its jury which would lead to media exposure and public interest. The Impressionists' alternative exhibition was publicized by the critics (Galenson & Jensen, 2002, p. 26). And by exhibiting together and displaying several canvases by each artist, the Impressionists were seen as a movement with a recognizable style (pp. 27–28). As Galenson and Jensen argue, "the monopoly of the official Salon was replaced (...) by a series of smaller group exhibitions organized by artists. The Impressionists were thus leaders not only in creating modern art, but also in developing its markets" (p. 2). Their genius, two-fold. Their success, collaborative.

While not a meso-level theorist like Farrell or Gary Alan Fine, Bourdieu's (1993) ideas on economic, social, and cultural capital are useful for explaining the functioning of such groups. According to Farrell (2001, p. 151), relative equality in the possession of capital within a circle facilitates the formation of an egalitarian unit in which its "members can disagree with one another openly, even insult one another with humor, as friends can, without fear of retaliation" (see Fine & Corte, 2024). Furthermore, a balanced exchange of resources contributes to them to keep pace with one another in their creative work and to maintain stability in the group.

Yet it's the symbolic interactionists' ideas on "joint action" (Blumer, 1966; Becker, 2008), and research on collective action (Snow et al., 2004, p. 6) and small groups (Farrell, 2001) which help explain both why the Impressionists experienced structural disadvantages (Bourdieu, 1984; 1993) and how they circumvented and used them to their advantage: creating an innovative style, then devising a campaign to secure its acceptance. Who were the Impressionists? Where did they first meet? Was there at one point a core and a peripheral group? Who were they fighting against? Where can we find them? These would be some of Becker's initial questions, as if to echo Robert Park's dictum: "*Where you there?*"

A sociology of the possible is a sociology of creative work and imagination, a label Becker would have appreciated. Becker's approach is eclectic, even playful, scientific yet artistic, theoretical but skeptical of that sacred object of ours. It's also lightly literary marked by a journalistic bent. In fact, it shines in its essayistic form. It's deeply sociological yet open to using work

2. "...young artists like Monet believe that painting has something to do with seeing. He observes how colours change in the light and captures those impressions. He knows what poppies look like, but what he sees are red dots, and that is what he paints. He also notices the movement of the clouds and the wind and tries to make them perceivable in his works. His approach leads to bright-coloured paintings in which the various traces of the brushwork are visible." Kunsthau Zürich.

and references from other disciplines and popular culture. Like much of ethnography, it lies between the humanities and the social sciences, verging more towards the latter.

Remembering Howard Becker is not only reminding ourselves of what sociology has been, but also of what it can be.

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