

Howard S. Becker.

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Figure/Ground Communication™

"The Meaning of Meaning is Relationship"

Howard S. Becker

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Dr. Becker was interviewed by Gonzalo Ralón and Laureano Ralón on January 12th, 2013.



(<http://figuregroundcommunications.files.wordpress.com/2013/01/beckerhowards.jpg>)

Howard S. Becker is an American sociologist who has made major contributions to the sociology of deviance, sociology of art, and sociology of music. Becker also wrote extensively on sociological writing styles and methodologies. In addition, Becker's book *Outsiders: Studies in the Sociology of Deviance*

(http://www.amazon.com/Outsiders-Sociology-Deviance-Howard-Becker/dp/0684836351/ref=sr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1358137487&sr=1-1&keywords=Outsiders%3A+Studies+in+the+Sociology+of+Deviance)

provided the foundations for labeling theory (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Labeling_theory). Becker is often called a symbolic interactionist or social constructionist; however, he does not align himself with either field. A graduate of the University of Chicago, Becker is considered part of the second Chicago School of Sociology (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chicago_School_of_Sociology) which also includes Erving Goffman (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Erving_Goffman) and Anselm Strauss (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anselm_Strauss). Much of Becker's early work was guided in the Chicago School tradition, in particular by Everett C. Hughes (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Everett_C._Hughes) who served as Becker's mentor and advisor. Other books include *Art Worlds* (http://www.amazon.com/Art-Worlds-Howard-S-Becker/dp/05220052188/sr=1-1/qid=1171494123/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&s=books) (1982), *Tricks of the Trade: How to Think about Your Research While You're Doing It* (http://www.amazon.com/Tricks-Trade-Research-Chicago-Publishing/dp/0226041247/ref=sr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1358137384&sr=1-1&keywords=Tricks+of+the+Trade%3A+How+to+Think+about+Your+Research+While+You%27re+Doing+It) (1998), *Telling About Society* (http://www.amazon.com/Telling-Society-Chicago-Writing-Publishing/dp/0226041263/ref=sr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1358137411&sr=1-1&keywords=Telling+About+Society) (2007), *Writing for Social Scientists* (http://www.amazon.com/Writing-Social-Scientists-Chicago-Publishing/dp/0226041328/ref=sr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1358137437&sr=1-1&keywords=Writing+for+Social+Scientists) (Second edition, 2007), and *Do You Know . . . ? The Jazz Repertoire in Action* (http://www.amazon.com/Do-You-Know-Repertoire-Action/dp/0226239217/ref=sr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1358137462&sr=1-1&keywords=Do+You+Know+.+.+.+%3F+The+Jazz+Repertoire+in+Action), with Robert R. Faulkner (2009). (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Howard_S._Becker#cite_note-vita-5)

(http://www.amazon.com/Tricks-Trade-Research-Chicago-Publishing/dp/0226041247/ref=sr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1358137384&sr=1-1&keywords=Tricks+of+the+Trade%3A+How+to+Think+about+Your+Research+While+You%27re+Doing+It) (1998), *Telling About Society* (http://www.amazon.com/Telling-Society-Chicago-Writing-Publishing/dp/0226041263/ref=sr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1358137411&sr=1-1&keywords=Telling+About+Society) (2007), *Writing for Social Scientists* (http://www.amazon.com/Writing-Social-Scientists-Chicago-Publishing/dp/0226041328/ref=sr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1358137437&sr=1-1&keywords=Writing+for+Social+Scientists) (Second edition, 2007), and *Do You Know . . . ? The Jazz Repertoire in Action* (http://www.amazon.com/Do-You-Know-Repertoire-Action/dp/0226239217/ref=sr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1358137462&sr=1-1&keywords=Do+You+Know+.+.+.+%3F+The+Jazz+Repertoire+in+Action), with Robert R. Faulkner (2009). (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Howard_S._Becker#cite_note-vita-5)

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(http://www.amazon.com/Tricks-Trade-Research-Chicago-Publishing/dp/0226041247/ref=sr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1358137384&sr=1-1&keywords=Tricks+of+the+Trade%3A+How+to+Think+about+Your+Research+While+You%27re+Doing+It) (1998), *Telling About Society* (http://www.amazon.com/Telling-Society-Chicago-Writing-Publishing/dp/0226041263/ref=sr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1358137411&sr=1-1&keywords=Telling+About+Society) (2007), *Writing for Social Scientists* (http://www.amazon.com/Writing-Social-Scientists-Chicago-Publishing/dp/0226041328/ref=sr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1358137437&sr=1-1&keywords=Writing+for+Social+Scientists) (Second edition, 2007), and *Do You Know . . . ? The Jazz Repertoire in Action* (http://www.amazon.com/Do-You-Know-Repertoire-Action/dp/0226239217/ref=sr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1358137462&sr=1-1&keywords=Do+You+Know+.+.+.+%3F+The+Jazz+Repertoire+in+Action), with Robert R. Faulkner (2009). (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Howard_S._Becker#cite_note-vita-5)

What do you think of yourself as – a university professor, a scholar, a researcher, a public

intellectual?

I guess I'd say some combination of a scholar and a researcher, with maybe a little of a private intellectual (not public, not ever) thrown in.

You were a professional jazz pianist during and following your university studies at the University of Chicago. How did these two activities complement one another and to what extent the forms of interaction you were exposed to as a young musician in the world of jazz influenced your conception of the social world?

Playing the piano supported me, in large part, through my years as a graduate student and the post-Ph.D. years when I could not get a university teaching job, though I have to admit that I didn't look very hard for one. I didn't want to move to a small university town, which is where a lot of potential jobs were, being a born and bred Chicagoan and diehard big city type. Living in Chicago after the Ph.D., I worked in the same bars as I had before, with the same people and kinds of people I'd worked with before, and that was OK with me. Although I'd concluded that I was probably better off out of the music business as a full-time life. It didn't seem like I was going to be the great jazz pianist I had hoped to be. But piano playing got me through times when I was scuffling for sociology jobs. And I kept on playing for years after I did have real sociology jobs, because I enjoyed it.

More importantly, and I suppose this is what you meant, the music business inoculated me against becoming too entranced with the academic life (which I think is probably not healthy for a researcher to be too involved in). It gave me other options to think about, so I didn't take an academic career – with everything you buy into when you get into that way of life – as the only thing I could do. I knew there was another world every bit as interesting waiting out there.

And, for a sociologist, I think it inoculated me against believing conventional pieties about the *society* I lived in and studied. I knew better (about the police, about drugs, about music, about the motives of "important people," all that.)

In your book, *Tricks of the Trade* (1998), you align yourself with the sociological tradition of Hughes, Park and Simmel. More recently, what other figures have influenced the later part of your intellectual development?

Well, most of them aren't sociologists. A lot of them were people in musicology and ethnomusicology, like Leonard Meyer, Paul Berliner, Charles Seeger, and in other fields of the arts and disciplines that study the arts. In general, it's all the people cited in some of my books like *Art Worlds* (Ernst Gombrich, J.H. Sutherland, David Lewis, etc.).

More recently, it's been people mainly in France: Raymonde Moulin, Alain Pessin, Bruno Latour, Pierre-Michel Menger, and many others, most of them not so well known in North America because they haven't been translated. And there are lots of others, there and here in the U.S. as well, especially people I have worked or taught with, like Charles Ragin, Robert Faulkner and Dwight Conquergood. It's a long list.

What attracted to you to academia? Do you think the university as an institution is in crisis or at least under threat in this age of information, digital interactive media and academic capitalism?

My mentor, Everett C. Hughes, once told me that the best way to support the life of an intellectual was to become a professor. I'm not so sure that that's true, but it was true enough at the time and it was the best choice I had available, particularly because the circumstances that made it impossible for me to find an academic job early on freed me for research and publication opportunities. Ray Mack then offered me a full professorship at Northwestern, which was then and I think probably still is a very civilized university, and certainly an unusually civilized sociology department.

I don't know if the university is in crisis, but the last thing you mention—academic capitalism, though I'd rather say the "infestation of universities by a business-school oriented *managerialism*"—is a real

danger for sure. I shudder, I really do, when I hear young scholars describe the conditions they work under; and I'm glad that I got out when the getting was good.

In your view, has the role of university professor “evolved” since you were an undergraduate student?

Of course it has. The pressure to do more of everything, the difficulties of academic publishing (by which I mean the bizarre formulas that seem to govern the decisions of journal editors), the constant hovering threat of “assessments” which are now busy destroying university life in Britain. I guess “evolution” is hardly the right word for such an insidious process. I don't know what to call it.

What makes a good teacher in your view?

For me, what makes a good teacher is helping students learn a useful academic trade, like doing research and writing it up, listening when they talk, taking what they say seriously, and above all, never lying to them. Does that mean I think faculty sometimes or even often lie to students? Yes. For instance, when they tell them fairy tales about how requirements for the Ph.D. (exams, papers, etc.) serve a useful purpose. That's just an example, not the whole bill of particulars.

What advice do you have for graduate students contemplating a professorial career in university?

Think twice.

Let's move on. Much of social constructionist thought has shaped a great deal of contemporary social theorizing in the 20th century. What's your definition of the social construction of reality and why do you think the notion has had so much influence in the social sciences?

“The social construction of reality” means for me simply that people talk to each other, in person or otherwise, and decide what to call things around them and how to understand those things. Other people might decide those questions differently and that's why the notion of social construction has some traction, because it makes you see that what you think is real, isn't necessarily real for some other people, and that that creates a very fruitful area for research and understanding.

In recent years, a number of countries across the Americas began to rethink their domestic policies of drug use. What contributions are to be expected from academics and public intellectuals to current debates surrounding drug policy in Latin America and the US?

I don't expect any important contributions to these debates from academics and public intellectuals. The only contribution people like us can make is to study the reality and show what it is. We will never have enough clout to make our ideas into real policies that governments would follow. Anyone who wants to understand why drug policy is what it is today should read *Le grand deal de l'opium* by F. X. Dudouet, which documents the way these policies have been shaped to protect the monopolies of the important *countries* where pharmaceutical drugs are manufactured.

What is your opinion about recent discussions relating to the legalization of drug consumption in Washington state and Colorado state in the US? To what extent do you think a change in the current legislation can benefit drug users and their communities?

I still think of myself as some kind of scientist, so the answer to that is that it's an empirical question and we'll see how it works out and who it benefits. Chances are it won't work out the way anyone has imagined it would. Very few policy changes do.

What are the projects you are currently working on?

I'm writing a book called – and I love this title – *What About Mozart? What About Murder?*, the subtitle of which is “Reasoning from Cases.” It's sort of an analysis of things I've written, explaining the theoretical manoeuvres, I guess you could say, that underlie them.

And I'm collaborating with Daniel Cefai of the École des Hautes Études in Paris on a book about the development of sociological research methods in the U.S. from approximately the end of World War II until . . . well, until we decide to stop. Daniel is doing all the hard archival work and I'm doing the easy part – remembering what it was like back then.

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