

## Ways of Telling About Society

*Howard S. Becker in Conversation With Reiner Keller*

**Key words:**  
Chicago sociology;  
field work;  
photography;  
performance; art;  
labeling theory;  
methodology;  
doing things  
together; social  
worlds; symbolic  
interactionism;  
case design

**Abstract:** In the following conversation, Howard S. BECKER talks about his lifelong travel with and between sociology and jazz music, his professional training as a sociologist, the hazards of a career, and his involvement with photography and performance. He reflects on the different ways used by artists and sociologists to tell solid stories about social phenomena, and tells a compelling account in its own right about the methodology of sound sociological field work and case study research. By explaining core concepts of his sociological perspective (such as the concept of labeling and "doing things together") and referring to concrete research examples, BECKER in all modesty fully engages with what could be called today's sociological imagination, leaving narrow disciplinary constraints behind in order to explore society with curiosity, using methodologically sensible but nevertheless refreshing approaches.

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### Biographical Note<sup>1</sup>

Howard S. BECKER, born in Chicago in 1928, is among the major figures of international contemporary sociology. Throughout his life, doing sociology and (playing) jazz music have been closely related. BECKER received his formative education in the context of the Chicago tradition of sociological research as represented by Everett C. HUGHES and his close colleagues from the department of sociology in Chicago in the late 1940s and early 1950s. After completing his PhD in 1951, he was involved in a series of studies on deviance (drug use) and music, and on school teachers and the transforming of students into professional medical doctors. In 1965 he became professor of sociology at Northwestern University, Evanston, Illinois, USA, where he intensified his

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1 Information compiled from DANKO (2015). All photographs, if not otherwise indicated, with permission from Howard S. BECKER's homepage (<http://howardsbecker.com/photos.html>) [Accessed: February 25, 2016].

interests in the arts, photography, and in presentations of sociological research as performances. Major areas of work have been sociology of deviance and labeling, sociology of professions, sociology of art, sociology of (jazz) music, sociology and photography, and methodology of sociological research. In 1991, he left Northwestern for the University of Washington, Seattle, Washington, USA. He has taught in Brazil; since the mid-2000s he has visited France annually to give lectures and conferences. From 1961-1964, BECKER acted as editor of *Social Problems*, in 1964-1965 as vice-president of the *Pacific Sociological Association*, from 1965-1966 as president of the *Society for the Study of Social Problems*, and from 1977-1978 as president of the *Society for the Study of Symbolic Interaction*. His major publications include "Boys in White. Student Culture in Medical School" (BECKER, GEER, HUGHES, & STRAUSS, 2002 [1961]), "Outsiders. Studies in the Sociology of Deviance" (BECKER, 1997 [1963]), "Making the Grade. The Academic Side of College Life" (BECKER, GEER, & HUGHES, 1997 [1968]), "Art Worlds" (BECKER, 2008 [1982]), "Doing Things Together" (BECKER, 1986), "Tricks of the Trade. How to Think About Your Work While Doing It" (BECKER, 1998), "Telling About Society" (BECKER, 2007), "'Do You Know ...?' The Jazz Repertoire in Action" (BECKER & FAULKNER, 2009) and "What About Mozart? What About Murder? Reasoning From Cases" (BECKER, 2014a). BECKER has received numerous fellowships and awards, including the *Charles Horton Cooley Award* of the *Society for the Study of Symbolic Interaction* in 1980, and five honorary doctorates in France and the UK. [1]

The interview took place on September 19, 2015 in Howard S. BECKER's and his partner Dianne HAGAMANN's apartment in Paris. It has been revised via e-mail exchange; this is the final, authorized version approved by Howard S. BECKER in March 2016. BECKER asked for the text style to be close to the informal oral style of the original face-to-face conversation. **Bold** letters refer to words pronounced in a loud voice and intense pronunciation. "[Laughter]" refers to a particular kind of emotion. "..." refers to a short reflective silence in conversation; "[...]" indicates overlapping of speakers. [2]

## 1. Writing Notes/Playing Notes

Reiner KELLER: Let's start with what one could call the professional biography. You received your PhD in Chicago and then you started working in different research projects in different locations, different cities too. I would like to talk about this phase of transition, after being a PhD student, having finished, and then going into this kind of fieldwork. How did this happen?

Howard S. BECKER: Well the first thing to understand is that I was not very serious about my PhD. I was playing the piano, professionally, and that's what I really intended to do. It was to be a great jazz pianist. But I was very young, I was living with my parents. My father would not accept that I should be a pianist who played in bars so I had to keep going to school. I finished the undergraduate school at Chicago and I was going to study literature because I liked to read novels, and I thought that would ... and then during the summer before starting

graduate school I read "Black Metropolis" (DRAKE & CAYTON, 2015 [1945]). I thought "this is what I wanna do, this is great." It's just like being an anthropologist but I can stay at home. I don't have to go to those places. And so I signed up and enrolled in sociology, and the first class I took was with Everett HUGHES.<sup>2</sup>



Photograph 1: Everett HUGHES in front of Howard BECKER's house in Kansas City [3]

It was a class on fieldwork and I enjoyed that. It was interesting, you know because he sent us out to do fieldwork. Then the next summer I took a class with Ernest BURGESS,<sup>3</sup> the famous Ernest BURGESS, in advanced fieldwork. And he said: "Well, either you get 12 questionnaires filled out for my study of old age or you start a master's thesis." I knew I wasn't going to do 12 questions, so ... I was playing the piano at a bar on 63rd Street. So I started writing fieldnotes, which I'd learned to do in the class. And at the end of the summer BURGESS read the field notes. And he said: "This is Professor Hughes, 'Occupations and Professions'" [...] [4]

Reiner KELLER: [Laughter] Go there!

Howard S. BECKER: [...] yes, fifth floor. HUGHES had Robert E. PARK's<sup>4</sup> older office. It was very meaningful ... So I went to see HUGHES and at first he was ...

2 Everett C. HUGHES (1897-1983), sociologist, one of the most prominent figures in American sociology. Professor in Chicago from 1938 to 1961; editor of the *American Journal of Sociology* and president of the *American Sociological Association* (in 1963). Major areas of work include race, ethnic relations, work and occupation, sociological fieldwork. See HUGHES (1984a).

3 Ernest BURGESS (1886-1966), Canadian-American sociologist, one of the founders of sociology in Chicago where he taught from 1916 to 1957. In 1934 he became the 24th president of the *American Sociological Association* (then: *American Sociological Society*). Areas of work include urban sociology, aging, and family. With Robert E. PARK, he wrote one of the most influential text books in sociology ever (PARK & BURGESS, 1921) as well as a path-breaking book on "The City" (PARK, BURGESS, & MCKENZIE, 1925).

4 Robert E. PARK (1864-1944), one of the leading figures of American sociology and founder of ethnographic work in urban sociology. He received his PhD in Germany (Heidelberg), worked as journalist and taught at Chicago University from 1914-1933. He was president of the *American Sociological Society* (later renamed *American Sociological Association*) in 1925. Areas of work include urban sociology, urban ecology and race relations (see PARK, 1974 [1934]; PARK & BURGESS, 1921).

he didn't want to have anything to do with students, except if they were doing something interesting. I came and knocked on his door and he said "What do you want?" I said: "Mr. Burgess told me to give you these fieldnotes." He said "alright, come back in a week." Okay, so I came back in a week and it was completely different. He was very welcoming, "come in" and "sit down." What had happened is he had been looking for years for people who would study some kind of occupation that wasn't one of the high professions like law or medicine. But for somebody who would study something low—this was it. So he wasn't going to lose me. I did the master's thesis under his direction. And then he had gotten a grant for the study of the Chicago elementary and high schools. He needed somebody to interview school teachers, so he offered me the job. I got paid a dollar an hour. Not great, but not bad—this is 1949 or 1950. [5]

I interviewed, I think, 50 or 60 school teachers. I would give him each interview and he would read it and comment on it. And then after I did about 20, I came in and I gave him an interview and he said: "Why are you giving me this?" I said: "I thought I was supposed to." He said: "You know how to do it, don't bother me with this." [Laughter] That's the way he taught, and it was wonderful—"You can do it, well just do it." So he essentially led me through ... [6]

Reiner KELLER: May I just ask you—you referred to the fieldwork and the advanced fieldwork. So the difference between the two was just the title of the course?

Howard S. BECKER: Yeah. You know, you're an experienced person. It means nothing.

Reiner KELLER: For HUGHES, doing good fieldwork—what did this imply?

Howard S. BECKER: Well, that you listened carefully, that you paid attention to what people said to you and remembered it. You used what you heard to frame more questions. You know that you understood what the job was, which is to see what this person had to tell you. Not to ask a series of fixed questions [...]

Reiner KELLER: That's true.



Photograph 2: Howard S. Becker, playing at a place on 63 Street in Chicago, around 1950 [7]

Howard S. BECKER: [...] you know, to have a conversation in which everything that a sociologist wanted to know would be told. What was that? Well who knows? I doubt ... And so I wrote that and ... I think HUGHES was not very

interested in methods of analysis, so one of the more senior graduate students who was working for him showed me how you sorted out the pieces and how you could you know put it together and say something. I wrote the master's thesis while I was working on the teachers. At some time point—I was nearly finished with the dissertation, HUGHES said to me suddenly "You should write an article," so I said "About what?" He said: "Well, your master's thesis. Write an article." "So what do you want me to write about?" He said: "Take one idea and anything that you can make stick to that idea, you leave in, and if you can't make it stick—leave it out." OK. So I wrote my first article. It was about this bizarre subject—musicians. There was no field like that. HUGHES was the editor of the *American Journal of Sociology* at the time, so I sent it to different sociology journals. There weren't so many, and they all turned it down: "Too bizarre, not interesting." So finally he said: "OK. Send it to the American Journal of Sociology," and they published it. That's how it started and then it's a habit for me.



Photograph 3: Bobby Laine Trio, ca. 1950 (Bobby LAINE, tenor; Dominic JACONETTI, drums; Howard BECKER, piano), performing at the 504 Club in Chicago [8]

So I did that, and then when I finished my PhD, I stayed two years in Chicago. I had gotten married, so I have to have a job when I finished my master's degree. I went to HUGHES and said "Well, goodbye. It's been very interesting, but I have to go to work now. So I'm gonna work full-time playing the piano and I can't do this." And he just ignored what I said, paid no attention and he said "Did you apply for a fellowship?" I said "No, I'm leaving school." He said "Go apply for a fellowship." I was obedient, and I'm sure he arranged it, and I got the fellowship and there I was studying for a PhD. It's really kind of funny, because since I was not really serious, it wasn't very complicated for me. I didn't worry about things, you know, I just took the exams and [...] [9]

Reiner KELLER: You weren't too set on getting it [...]

Howard S. BECKER: Yeah, if I get it, I don't get it ... So in a couple of years I finished. That's a good part of the reason why I was 23 when I got my PhD. People think "Oh you must've been so smart," but no, I just didn't care [chuckles]. I just did it. And then I couldn't find a job, I was like 23 years old.

Reiner KELLER: Too young! [10]

## 2. "Meet Me in Kansas City Tomorrow"

Howard S. BECKER: Too young, right, but I persuaded someone at the *Institute for Juvenile Research*,<sup>5</sup> which was not part of the University of Chicago. It was paid for by the state of Illinois, but it was all Chicago people there. And I persuaded them to pay me half-time to study marijuana use. I knew about this, of course from being in the music business. And I had a model, which was Alfred LINDESMITH's (2008 [1947]) book on "Opiate Addiction."<sup>6</sup> Do you know this book?

Reiner KELLER: I only know the title, I don't know the book. [11]

Howard S. BECKER: It should be reprinted. I mean it's a wonderful book. And it had everything in it I needed, because marijuana was a very interesting case of the same thing. LINDESMITH's idea was that the phenomenon of addiction was the result of a change in the way people thought about the drug and their experience with it. Well, I knew with marijuana there was no addiction. But there was something, which was getting high, and people ... how to understand that. A pharmacologist told me years later that it was a real mystery because cannabis has very little physiological effect. When they study a drug pharmacologically, you know they study ... It doesn't affect anything. It has this tremendous psychological activity, so we were very interested in that. I knew that it was all about how the user interpreted what happened. Including not being aware that it was happening. So I wrote that up and it was published in the *American Journal of Sociology* and it was very interesting that nobody cared: "Not interesting!" Because it wasn't a social problem. Nobody cared about it. That was very funny. I don't know how I developed the idea of labeling. I mean it was around, it's not my original idea. Edwin LEMERT<sup>7</sup> (1951) had written about it, and other earlier people. I wrote about it, I think, more clearly and easier to understand. I put it together with the musicians and marijuana articles and made a book. That was "Outsiders" (BECKER, 1997 [1963]). [12]

But in the meantime, you know I worked two years in Chicago. Partly teaching at the university because HUGHES went on leave. I taught his fieldwork class. Things like that. I researched things on marijuana. Then I had a fellowship for two years at the University of Illinois, and then HUGHES called me, and said in his wonderfully abrupt way: "Meet me in Kansas City tomorrow." I said "Why?" He said: "We're going to study a medical school." I said: "We are?" He said: "Yes!" So I got a plane to Kansas City and met him there and that's what happened. For the next seven years I worked on research, first in medical school, produced the book "Boys in White" (BECKER et al., 2002 [1961]). Then at the undergraduate university which produced "Making the Grade" (BECKER et al., 1997 [1968]). And

5 Founded in 1909; for the history, work and renaming of the institute see <http://www.psych.uic.edu/aboutus/history> [Accessed: February 25, 2016].

6 Alfred R. LINDESMITH (1905-1991) was professor of sociology at Indiana University. He got his PhD with Herbert BLUMER (a former assistant of George Herbert MEAD and then leading protagonist in the theory of symbolic interaction; see BLUMER 1991 [1969]) at Chicago University in 1937.

7 Edwin LEMERT (1912-1996), American sociologist and criminologist, wrote key works in labeling theory introducing the concept of "secondary deviance." Professor of sociology at the University of California, Los Angeles and University of California, Davis.

then I went to work at Stanford. Because I wanted to live in San Francisco that was the reason I went there. It was not a great center of sociology, but it was very near to San Francisco. So I could live in the city and go down there when it was necessary, but the sociology department was terrible and I wasn't really involved in it anyway, I was in a research institute. Then in 1965—see by this time it was 14 to 15 years since my PhD, and I had published a great deal. I mean, I had published two or three books and a lot of articles. And the American university system was just exploding, and there were so many students because of the baby boom and all that. So they really needed teachers, and especially senior people, because there weren't many older people to be the senior professors. I wasn't really, as they say, "hot property," but I didn't want to leave. I would never have left San Francisco, except to go back to Chicago. For that I would. [13]

### 3. "Twenty-Eight Percent"

Howard S. BECKER: And Ray MACK<sup>8</sup> was the head of the department of sociology at the *Northwestern University* in Evanston, close north of Chicago. I met him because [...]

Reiner KELLER: [...] he was a drummer.

Howard S. BECKER: [...] he was a drummer, yes. That's how we met. We were very good friends. He was a very unusual, unusually intelligent administrator. Frankly, I usually think of administrators as not the most intelligent people. But he was. He knew how to run things. He would start recruiting you when he didn't have a position for you, but he would make you feel that somehow "this is where you should be and we are gonna work it out, don't worry." Then one day he called me, and offered me a full professorship at a nice salary and I said to him "You son of a bitch." He started to laugh, because he knew why I said that. Because I was going to have to leave San Francisco. I took six weeks, but I gave up. It was wonderful. I was there thirty years or more. It was a great place to work, wonderful graduate students and good colleagues, all over the university. When I went there, they had a wonderful ethno-musicologist named Klaus WACHSMANN.<sup>9</sup> Then they had Paul BERLINER,<sup>10</sup> who wrote a great book about jazz improvisation (BERLINER, 1994). [14]

Reiner KELLER: So you felt very comfortable there?

Howard S. BECKER: Yeah, and then there were all kinds of ... Later on, there was somebody that I talk about in "Telling About Society" (BECKER, 2007), L.

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8 Raymond W. MACK (1927-2011), professor of sociology at Northwestern University, Evanston, taught there from 1953 to 1971 and 1987-1992 (break due to administrative work). He co-founded in 1968 the University's center for urban affairs. Between 1971 and 1987, he acted as dean of faculties and vice-president of the university. Major areas of work: race relations and social inequality.

9 Klaus WACHSMANN (1907-1984), British ethno-musicologist, compiled and studied traditional African music, e.g. in Uganda. He became professor of music at the University of California, Los Angeles (1963-1968) which he left for a professorship at Northwestern University.

10 Paul Franklin BERLINER (\*1946), American ethno-musicologist at Northwestern University which he left for Duke University where he holds a professorship in arts and sciences. Major areas of work: African music, jazz, and improvisation.

Dwight CONQUERGOOD<sup>11</sup>, who was a professor of performance studies, which was a field that barely existed. He helped invent it, but I was already very interested in it, like different ways of presenting sociology, and the dramatic presentation seemed to me very interesting. We taught a class for two years. The second year the photographer Dianne HAGAMANN<sup>12</sup>—by then we were married—came and photographed the whole thing. That's a body of material that really needs to be exploited. Dwight, unfortunately, died very young. *Northwestern* was a kind of place ... when I started to work on art worlds I had a fellowship at the center for advanced study, and one of the things I did, was to go to art school in San Francisco and learn to make photographs. Then when I came back to *Northwestern*, I decided to teach photography. They didn't have anybody doing that. It had been taught in the journalism school, but nobody was teaching it in journalism anymore. My colleagues were great—I said "I wanna teach photography as a research method"—"Great! Go ahead! Do it!" So I did that for six or eight years. [15]

Reiner KELLER: I would like to come back later to the questions of performance and photography. This transition from funded research on the medical school, then teaching and becoming a university professor ... It's a move, so now you're more on your own, somehow. You said earlier research was all managed by HUGHES before and you had to do fieldwork and that kind [...]

Howard S. BECKER: Well, I had become more and more independent of HUGHES because I had more of my own record of producing. [16]

Reiner KELLER: Being a professor then meant exactly what, compared to today? In the German university system for example, if you are on a professorship, you have so many administrative tasks to do that it's hard to get any kind of fieldwork done if you don't get a grant to be out of office for a while.

Howard S. BECKER: I don't know what it's like in American universities today, I don't think there's that much. I think European universities, the British and French I know, are filled with that kind of unnecessary work to do. We didn't have any of that, and I found it very easy to avoid administrative work. Because in the department there wasn't a lot, and in the university ... They didn't have any of these systems of assessment and ranking and all that stuff. It didn't exist. If you wanted to get research grants—good. That's nice, the university approved of that. They made a certain profit, but it wasn't necessary. And all the university committees ... I mean, very quickly you can make a reputation: "He's not good at committees," so I worked very hard to have this reputation, and I succeeded. Ray MACK knew me very well—he said "it's true, you're not good at committees, you don't have the temperament for it. And I wouldn't ask you." So occasionally, someone would ask me to be on some committee and I would just say "No, I don't think I can do that." What I learned was very simple—they don't want you to

11 L. Dwight CONQUERGOOD (1949-2004), American ethnographer, received a PhD in performance studies at Northwestern University where he then started to teach in 1978. Major areas of work include ethnographies in South East Asia, on Chicago's street gangs, refugees, and death penalty.

12 A presentation of her work as well as some projects with Howard S. BECKER can be found at <http://www.diannehagaman.com/index.html> [Accessed: February 25, 2016].



be on the committee, they want somebody to be on the committee. If you don't do it, they'll go to the next one, until they find someone who's foolish enough to say yes. There's always some people like this. [17]

Reiner KELLER: This meant that you had students, working with them? They did research, or you could do fieldwork?

Howard S. BECKER: Well I taught a course in fieldwork. More or less modeled on, not on the one HUGHES taught, but on his way of teaching. It became very well-known how I did it. The first day of the class it would usually be the incoming students who knew nothing about what's going to happen. So they'd come in, and I'd say "OK. Before we leave this room today, every one of you must tell me where you're going to do your fieldwork for the next ten weeks." "Oh, we're not ready." I said: "Of course not, but you have to choose."—"Well we can't choose"—"You're going to choose. Nobody leaves this room until they choose." And then somebody would say "I would like to do ..." Then we would discuss. Somebody said "Well, there's this organization I'm interested in ..." I didn't ask about theories or anything. I said "How often do they meet?" He said "Once a month," and I said: "Where are you going to do the fieldwork if they only meet once a month." They'd ask "Well where should we go?" I said "I don't know, a garage where they repair cars." Somebody said "How about the fire department" "Good idea! Go there! They're there all the time." Or this or that ... So by the end of two hours, very painfully, they all agreed to do something. I said "OK, now that you've chosen, you go there, you stay there for three or four hours" and they'd ask "What do we do?" "You just sit there and watch, listen, ask questions if you feel like it." You know ... [18]

Reiner KELLER: A rather direct way to the observation, to asking and moving around.

Howard S. BECKER: Yes, just go do it! So it was very funny, someone would say ... they knew they should interview, but they had no idea what that meant. Finally they would come to the ... and then they had to write down everything that happened and give it to me, and I responded. That was where the work was, because I didn't prepare lectures. They would come and say "I finally got my nerve up and I said 'Can I interview you?' And they said yeah. Then I didn't know what to ask." [Laughter] Then I'd ask "Did anybody else have this experience?" Then we talked about it—what would you ask about? How could you do that? I'd make suggestions, but essentially I'd force them to teach themselves how to do it.

Reiner KELLER: And amongst each other, too.

Howard S. BECKER: Yeah, soon they were talking to each other. Which I always thought when that happens, then the class was a success. [19]

Reiner KELLER: You mentioned the performative move or ideas. In the book "Telling About Society," you are talking about that as well (BECKER, 2007, Chapter 7). You explain a little bit about what you did at that time. There might be two aspects of performing, one is the presentation of sociological work through

performance as e.g. in the reading of the text. What you're referring to in the book—reading with emotion, reading with feeling.

Howard S. BECKER: Oh, you should've heard that, it was so funny. Because you know what a sociology article is like. 28% this and xx% that ... This kid, he was an acting student. Half the students were from drama and theater and the other half were from sociology. Putting in a dramatic voice: **twenty-eight percent**.

[Laughter] He wasn't wrong because it's implicit in an article like that, that there is a moral judgment. A serious moral judgment, people are angry. But of course it's hidden in the language. [20]

Reiner KELLER: Yeah, yeah. So, this kind of performance of sociological results or research results, there's this kind of reading ... Have there been other things? Theater pieces, or kind of poems?

Howard S. BECKER: There was a wonderful piece. One of the people in that class, she was a PhD student in sociology, she was also a student of martial arts. When it was her turn to present something, she did a dramatic presentation. First, she showed a series of films of her being told by different instructors in martial arts ... You know this thing in martial arts where you break a board? They said: "Well a woman can't do that. You could never do that." So one after the other, four or five of these short films. "You could never do that." Then all the lights went out. Completely dark and then one light over the door to the room went on. **Boom!** She comes out in the full uniform and this accomplice gets up and holds a board. It was so dramatic, I mean, it was so unbelievable. And you think "Can she do it? Is she going to do it?" **Boom!** It was one of the most thrilling things I ever saw. [21]

Reiner KELLER: These performances have been brought to a broader audience as well?

Howard S. BECKER: No, this is just in the class. Several of them would collaborate, that was a later part of the class, and they would do group performances, which were fascinating. In mean it was very funny, because CONQUERGOOD and I had no idea what they could do. Nobody had ever done this kind of stuff and who knew what they would do? They were so ingenious. They imagined things that I could never have imagined. It brings out parts ... they didn't only perform social science, they performed literary works and what not. [22]

Reiner KELLER: A second aspect of performance refers to ... there has been the discussion or the idea of using performances to get data. In schools, for example, asking students to perform on their everyday life [...]

Howard S. BECKER: We weren't doing that, but I was so bored with the standard sociological presentations, which usually are not very interesting. I just thought it would be wonderful if we could ... And then, finally, I had left Northwestern and I was at the University of Washington (Seattle) and I developed a seminar which was called "Telling About Society" and we did different things each week. I did that class twice, once at Washington and once at Santa Barbara, and it was very, very interesting with the arguments that people would get into. "You can't call

Jane AUSTEN<sup>13</sup> a sociologist"—I do call her it. Why not? Or George Bernard SHAW.<sup>14</sup>

Reiner KELLER: They're in the book, too.

Howard S. BECKER: Yeah, so a lot of that book came from that class. [23]

#### 4. Photography

Reiner KELLER: And you talk about photography, about Walker EVANS,<sup>15</sup> for example, and other photographers. It's in the book—we don't have to talk about the distinctions between author-driven or more audience-driven things. I wondered about the idea, the difference between sociological work and photography. The artist, or the photographer, she or he can just refer to her/his own individual perspective on what's happening—social inequality or street life [...]

Howard S. BECKER: Well, actually a lot of photographers are very interested in the same things that sociologists are. [24]

Reiner KELLER: So they're doing a kind of research work, too?

Howard S. BECKER: Absolutely. You know, you must know about Robert FRANK's "The Americans" (2008 [1958]).<sup>16</sup> To me, that's a work of sociology. I'm sure FRANK would deny this. But that's because he's a crazy old man. Walker EVANS—his proposal for this project is very sociological. It's just a different way. You know, one of my favorite projects of this kind is the book by John BERGER<sup>17</sup> and Jean MOHR<sup>18</sup> called "A Seventh Man" (BERGER & MOHR, 2010 [1975]). Do you know this book?

Reiner KELLER: No, I don't.

Howard S. BECKER: Oh, you'll have a wonderful experience! It's about guest workers in Northern Europe, who come from you know Southern Europe or the Middle East, and what their experience is. BERGER is a writer, and Jean MOHR is a Swiss photographer and it's a pretty incredible combination of stories, poetry, fictions. There is a kind of story of "he." "He leaves his village" and it doesn't say where it is, and he comes to a large city. Could be in Germany, could be in Sweden, and he has this kind of experience. And then there are photographs, wonderful photographs of all this. [25]

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13 Jane AUSTEN (1775-1817), British novelist.

14 George Bernard SHAW (1856-1950), Irish writer; winner of the Nobel Prize for literature in 1925.

15 Walker EVANS (1903-1975), American photographer, became famous for his style of new realism and documentary work on three farmer families in the 1930s period of Great American Depression (AGEE & EVANS, 1969 [1939]).

16 Robert FRANK (\*1924), American photographer, influenced by Walker EVANS, became famous with his 1950s photos of people from different classes in American society.

17 John BERGER (\*1926), British novelist, known for his fiction work as well as for his writings on pictures and seeing/looking.

18 Jean MOHR (\*1925), Swiss documentary photographer, worked on humanitarian interventions, e.g. on refugee camps.

Reiner KELLER: In Germany today, visual sociology is a kind of trendy hip thing around, and it has some impact, but it's very often ... discussion is about a convenient technique of interpretation. How to get meaning out of a photograph. Very complicated, very sophisticated.

Howard S. BECKER: I know what my people are like. [Laughter] [26]

Reiner KELLER: So what's your way to talk about the photos? Description, and then give a kind of interpretation?

Howard S. BECKER: Well, I mean it's in there. The thing is, it leaves the interpretation, for the most part, implicit. People don't give you the steps. They just say: **See this!** Walker EVANS, Dorothea LANGE<sup>19</sup> shows you the dust bowl<sup>20</sup> and the great migrations (LANGE, 1999 [1939]) and so forth, so what does she tell us about that? "Ah, you have to look it's so subtle," but I think if you look at Robert FRANK's book, that's not subtle. It's pretty obvious what his interpretation was of the Americans. [27]

Reiner KELLER: You would not pretend that there is the only one and true interpretation of the photo? I feel that some colleagues are trying to give the one best way to get access to the photo. I'm not sure what the corresponding research question is, but [...]

Howard S. BECKER: Not any more than there is one best way to do anything. If there was one best way to understand David HUME we would know it, and they wouldn't be arguing still. There's never one best way, there's some good ways. You try them out, you see what's useful for you.

Reiner KELLER: Yes, I completely agree.

Howard S. BECKER: If you recommend "Telling About Society," you must.

Reiner KELLER: There are a couple of reasons to recommend this book, I think, for sociology.

Howard S. BECKER: There's an *International Visual Sociology Association*,<sup>21</sup> you know this?

Reiner KELLER: Yeah. [28]

Howard S. BECKER: So an old friend of mine, who was a student of HUGHES in later years, Douglas HARPER<sup>22</sup>, has been a big mover in that group. But there are people all over the world that are involved in that. And you know, they're

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19 Dorothea LANGE (1895-1965), American pioneer of documentary photography, became famous for her work on the Great American Depression, with photos of the unemployed and the homeless.

20 Dust bowl is a common word for the great plains regions (e.g. in Oklahoma) in the US heavily affected by dust storms and economic depression in the 1930s; people then migrated from that towards other US regions.

21 Established in 1981, see <http://visualsociology.org/> [Accessed: February 25, 2015].

22 Douglas HARPER (\*1948), American sociologist and photographer, professor emeritus at Duquesne University in Pittsburgh. Major areas of work: visual sociology, photography, photo elicitation, memory studies.

professors, mostly, so what they're interested in is making a field and having a theory. They don't accept the tentative nature of knowledge. They think that it's going to be all settled. Science is not like ... I mean **real** science is not like that. That's the new book [...]

Reiner KELLER: The one you're currently working on?

Howard S. BECKER: Yeah, I got a draft and I'm re-doing it.

Reiner KELLER: So it's about the openness of [...]? [29]

## 5. Data, Evidence, Ideas

Howard S. BECKER: Well, it's called "Should we believe what people tell us, or should we go look for ourselves?" It's: data, evidence, ideas. You collect observations, in whatever way—with a questionnaire, from a book in the census or by going there and looking. And then you use those ideas as evidence. You use those data as evidence to demonstrate that this idea is better. The steps that link, that make data into evidence, is really the hard part. Because there's so many things that can go wrong and sociologists are not good at ... They prefer not to think about that. But if you look at what natural scientists do, most of their effort goes to avoiding error. That's what they're doing. They're not making a mistake. They're not taking something to be something it really isn't. One chapter in the book tells two stories about scientists. One is ... Do you know this series that they publish here in France now "Raconter la vie" [Telling about life]?<sup>23</sup> It's a pretty interesting website and book publishing operation where they ... Pierre ROSANVALLON<sup>24</sup>, a historian, he's in charge of it. So they put out books that are 70, 80 pages, that are a story of somebody's life, somebody's experience. Different kinds of people, different kinds of work. Then they do shorter books. The longer books are printed and sold, I think they're five Euro. The shorter ones are available online. They have a kind of forum where people discuss them and it's a very interesting enterprise. I wrote a big review of this stuff on a site called *Public Books* (BECKER, 2014b), in New York.

Reiner KELLER: I'll have a look at that, sounds very interesting.

Howard S. BECKER: I think it's listed on my website. Why was I telling you that? [Laughter] [30]

Reiner KELLER: You were talking about evidence and the two stories about scientists in your new book.

Howard S. BECKER: So I used one of those books from there, by a physicist named Sébastien BALIBAR (2014). He works in low temperature physics. You try to get as close to absolute zero as possible. And he's having all kinds of trouble because he's got this special refrigerator and something is interfering with it. They are two stories down in the ground, in the basement, to protect against different

23 Book collection and participative internet platform project established in 2013, directed by Pierre ROSANVALLON, see <http://raconterlavie.fr> [Accessed: February 25, 2016].

24 Pierre ROSANVALLON (\*1948), French historian, professor at the *Collège de France* (Paris). Main areas of work: history of democracy and the (French) state, problems of social justice in contemporary society.

waves and things, and there's still something preventing it. The whole effort is to track down where these, it turns out, these X-rays, they're coming from who-knows-where, through some window. He has to get rid of that. That's the main effort. Then there's a wonderful long piece by Bruno LATOUR (1995) called "The Pedophile of Boa Vista," do you know this? [31]

Reiner KELLER: I know the chapter which he published on "circulating references," in his book "Pandora's Hope" (LATOUR, 1999, Chapter two) which might be the English translation. It is about whether a forest advances into the savanna, or whether it is retreating.

Howard S. BECKER: That's a later reworked article on the very same thing. Because what he does there is show you ever single thing these guys do to avoid making mistakes. And our people are not interested in that. Only if they get caught—otherwise no. There was just a scandal, maybe you know about it. You know this thing about social isolation in America? You know, the guy—Robert PUTNAM<sup>25</sup> wrote a book called "Bowling Alone" (PUTNAM, 2000), that there's no more community. *The General Social Survey*<sup>26</sup>—do you know what that is?

Reiner KELLER: I have an idea.

Howard S. BECKER: It's a recurring [...]

Reiner KELLER: Kind of big data machine. [32]

Howard S. BECKER: Yeah, and every second year they do a fairly large sample, several thousand people, Americans, and ask a certain number of questions that are the same. So they get time series. Then they take questions from ... You know, you write in and "Will you ask these questions?" and they choose some. So one of the questions was to ask people "If you have a problem to discuss, who would you speak to about that?" And then the actual variable they were looking for is how many people an interviewee names as a sign of social connectedness. Over a period of years they asked this and it was usually around 3, 3.2, something like that. All of a sudden it dropped by 1 or 1.5 people, so it's like **Aha! Something has happened!** Nobody could quite believe it, but ... they tried the standard analysis. There was nothing special about the people who had fewer ... They couldn't understand. Then one guy said "Let's try sorting the data by interviewer." Did some interviewers get fewer? Yes! There were maybe six or seven around the country who had markedly lower numbers, and it was obvious what was happening, which was they were discouraging people. Because for each one, you had to fill out another little form. So you could just practically ... you could imagine them saying "OK. You named one, you named this one. Thank you very much, now let's go on to the next question." And those six or seven people accounted for the entire effect. [33]

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25 Robert PUTNAM (\*1941), American political scientist, professor of public policy at Harvard University. Major areas of work include democracy, inequality, religion and public culture.

26 Sociological survey in the US, established in 1972 and conducted by the *National Opinion Research Center* at the *University of Chicago*, see <http://www.norc.org/Research/Projects/Pages/general-social-survey.aspx> [Accessed: February 25, 2016].

That shouldn't surprise anybody because years and years ago Julius ROTH<sup>27</sup>, who was a well-known fieldworker of my generation, Julius wrote an article in 1966 called "Hired Hand Research" (ROTH, 1966). It was "people do this for money, you better be careful what you're paying them for, because you're gonna get it." If you want them do that, they're gonna want to get through it as quickly as possible. Some of them will, some of them will. [34]

Reiner KELLER: Throughout the "Telling About Society" book, I had the feeling, that despite the impression that your way of looking and telling about the subjects you are dealing with avoids some kind of all too scientific, sociologist way of presentation, despite all this throughout the book there are so many reflections about what you're just referring to here and now—a sound way of thinking about society, and presenting data, arguments and evidence, including influences from science studies, maybe. You just referred to LATOUR and [...]

Howard S. BECKER: Yes. There are wonderful things in the serious methodological literature. There's this great statistician, John TUKEY<sup>28</sup>, and there is the examples in "Telling About Society" (BECKER, 2007, Chapter 5) of these funny diagrams that he did. They're so informative. And I asked sociologists: "Why don't you use it?," and you know the answer is: "Well, nobody does." [Laughter]

Reiner KELLER: It's never been like that ... we never did that [...]

Howard S. BECKER: [Laughter] "It's never been like that—are you trying to make trouble?" [35]

Reiner KELLER: So the book is about an intervention into sociology, to the way of practicing sociology?

Howard S. BECKER: This one?

Reiner KELLER: Yeah, "Telling About Society."

Howard S. BECKER: Absolutely.

Reiner KELLER: The new one maybe is, too.

Howard S. BECKER: This one is definitely. The idea is why don't you use TUKEY's inventions? They're marvelous. Because one of the worst things in a sociology journal is, you know you turn the page, and there's a big table with hundreds of numbers in it, and years ago a statistician told me: "Look, the only thing that matters is to compare two numbers and see which one is bigger or if they're both the same." Anything that helps you do that is good, anything that interferes is bad. And TUKEY gave you ways. I mean, he was a great name in that field. He was the king. Our people don't wanna hear this. [36]

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27 Julius A. ROTH (1924-2002), American sociologist, PhD at University of Chicago, mentored by Everett HUGHES, professor at University of California, Davis. Major area of work: medical sociology.

28 John TUKEY (1915-2000), American mathematician, professor of statistics at Princeton University. Major area of work: methods in statistics.

Reiner KELLER: So there could even be a kind of subtitle of the book—The title "Telling About Society" could have the subtitle "Telling About Sociology."  
[Laughter] You didn't put that on the front cover, but [...]

Howard S. BECKER: Well, you know I didn't, I wasn't trying to scold. I just say: "**Look!**" You go in the store and you only look on this shelf, but there is all this other stuff. So many things you could do. [37]

## 6. Doing and Undoing Things Together

Reiner KELLER: If you allow me to ask, I have two more questions, and then you can decide if you'd like to stop. One is about this very central idea of "Doing Things Together" (BECKER, 1986) which is a kind of "social worlds" idea (BECKER, 2006<sup>29</sup>) and very present in "Art Worlds" (BECKER, 2008 [1982]). I wondered, referring to the different books, from "Outsiders" (BECKER, 1997 [1963]) to "Art Worlds," in the latter it seems, "doing things together" means some kind of common production.

Howard S. BECKER: Well, the art world include the people who consume.

Reiner KELLER: OK, consume, too.

Howard S. BECKER: And they make the work when they look at it, hear it etc. [38]

Reiner KELLER: Compared to the "Outsiders" (ibid.) work, and maybe other situations, I was wondering if one could account for an important difference: "Doing Things Together" means different things in "Outsiders." Between the police who's trying to get the people into prison, and the marijuana users who are trying to escape, so this is a very different kind of doing things "together," for sure not a common project. You know what I mean?

Howard S. BECKER: Yes, well, that is right. The idea there came up with the generalization after I did "Outsiders," because deviance is a kind of co-production of all those people. Not just the police and the marijuana smoker. The legislator who makes the law, the administrator who organizes. You know, all of them. The scientists. [39]

Reiner KELLER: Are there phenomena where one could talk about "un-doing things together"?

Howard S. BECKER: That's the same thing.

Reiner KELLER: [...] destroying things together?

Howard S. BECKER: It's doing something else. That's the same thing. I mean it's a kind of ... it's a simple idea. It couldn't be more simple. The way I try to explain it to people is, I say, "Look, imagine that you're making a film, but you can look at the credits at the end of the film. You can see all these people." And my proposition is simple: They're all necessary. Don't be silly, you can't do a film without a caterer who provides lunch. Yes, you can, but it won't be **that** film. What

29 "Social worlds" is a classic concept of the Chicago sociology tradition, used by Howard S. BECKER and others (see e.g. STRAUSS 1991 [1978], Chapter 13 on: A social world perspective).



are you talking about? If you don't have a caterer, what happens? People go. They have to eat lunch, so they go. So they have a drink and they don't come back right away. This thing is enormously expensive, because you're renting equipment, you have all these lights, these cables and cameras etc., and that all costs, and you're paying for it by the hour. If these people are late coming from lunch, it costs you, and it means you have less money to do something else that you could've done in the film. I don't think they don't think that way. They do think that way, so we have lunch here. [40]

Reiner KELLER: In "What About Mozart? What About Murder?" (BECKER, 2014a)—I talked to an artist yesterday about the "Art Worlds" book, and the first question was: "What About Mozart?," what about the idea of genius or creativity. If I got it right, there is creativity all around, but the way it goes up and is recognized, acknowledged, is the social process.

Howard S. BECKER: Exactly, that's exactly right. I mean, I tell people "Everybody is creative," because you're constantly encountering things that aren't what you expected. Nothing is ever just the way you thought it would be, and you have to invent something. And people do, they're constantly inventing something. "Oh, we have to cook dinner! Oh well we don't have this! OK, let's use this instead or do it this way." Everybody is creative, the difference in these so-called creative people usually is that they, when they have an idea like that—like: something different—they pay attention to it. Other people say when it comes into your mind "That's silly, forget about it" and you don't pay attention to it. So the creative person, I would say, the one who gets recognized as a creative is the one who listens to those things and acts on them. [41]

Reiner KELLER: Because the whole arena, the world focuses on this element?

Howard S. BECKER: Well, not exactly. Nobody wants the second violinist to be creative, you know. Never mind creativity, you do what the conductor says. You do what the first chair does. If he says it's a downbow that's what you do.

Reiner KELLER: The bandleader and the support. [42]

Howard S. BECKER: Yeah, yeah. Of course there's a lot of disagreement about who's allowed to be creative, and who has to do what the other people say. That's why film is so interesting, because ... nobody has ever settled that question: Who is the one who really makes the decisions? There's this wonderful example, I love it. In "The Wizard of Oz"<sup>30</sup>, in that film, they had four different directors before the film was finished. That disposes of the auteur theory, there was no auteur. The most striking thing in the whole film is when Dorothy gets to OZ, and the film has been in black and white

Reiner KELLER: [...] and it switches to color! [43]

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30 American musical comedy and fantasy film produced by Metro Goldwyn Meyer and released in August 1939.

Howard S. BECKER: You know who thought of that? The composer and the lyricist, Harold ARLEN<sup>31</sup> and Edgar "Yip" HARBURG.<sup>32</sup> That was their idea.

Reiner KELLER: Lots of common creation, and a different kind of distributed creativity.

Howard S. BECKER: Well I mean that's what sociology is about. Who gets to do what, when? Because they have to depend on everybody else, and there's nothing that's so solitary that you do it all by yourself. [44]

## 7. No Chicago School!

Reiner KELLER: I wondered, and this will be my last question, about the "Outsider" book, and the theory of labeling—in a different kind for the "Art Worlds," but it might be the same—so this way of thinking [...]

Howard S. BECKER: Yes, it is a labeling theory of art. [45]

Reiner KELLER: [...] and telling that to society, so this might change a kind of social practice around, it was obviously for the labeling theory which changed the kind of police work somehow ... and there have been debates [...]

Howard S. BECKER: I know but I didn't [...]

Reiner KELLER: [...] but maybe it didn't change that much [...]

Howard S. BECKER: But I didn't write that book to change anything.

Reiner KELLER: No no, that's not what I wanted to say, but it has effects that the audience decides upon, what to do.

Howard S. BECKER: Yeah, absolutely. [46]

Reiner KELLER: So I consider that sociological writing is always a kind of intervention into society, maybe with more or less effects.

Howard S. BECKER: Well, inadvertently I mean, because, ah ... when you explain how something works you're automatically telling people how it could be changed. But that doesn't mean that you can change it. It does not even mean that anybody can change it. [47]

Reiner KELLER: No no no, that's a completely different thing.

Howard S. BECKER: And I think it's an ... ah ... it's always been built into sociology since the beginning. I don't know, I would have to think about Max WEBER<sup>33</sup> whether ... but ... or Emile DURKHEIM<sup>34</sup> maybe, I don't know. But I

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31 Harold ARLEN (1905-1986), American composer (e.g. "Over the Rainbow" from "The Wizard of Oz").

32 Edgar "Yip" HARBURG (1896-1981), American song lyricist (e.g. "Over the Rainbow" from "The Wizard of Oz").

33 Max WEBER (1864-1920), one of the classical German founders of sociology, arguing a social action, interaction and meaning orientated perspective in sociology. His concept of *soziales Handeln* [social action] has been translated as interaction into English.

think for me, my theoretical ancestor is Georg SIMMEL.<sup>35</sup> I don't think he is so interested in changing anything. He was just: "Oh look how this machine works!" You see, because my lineage, my heritage is SIMMEL. Robert E. PARK was a student of SIMMEL. HUGHES was a student of Robert E. PARK. GOFFMAN<sup>36</sup> is different, because [...]

Reiner KELLER: [...] he was more into DURKHEIM, a little bit SIMMEL too, the more "formal sociology" parts.

Howard S. BECKER: But originally Erving was DURKHEIM, Alfred RADCLIFFE BROWN<sup>37</sup>, William LLOYD WARNER<sup>38</sup>, GOFFMAN. That was the very direct lineage. [48]

Reiner KELLER: All those different people have never been the kind of group with the idea of doing, changing sociology together.

Howard S. BECKER: NO! It's so funny—once Daniel CEFAÏ<sup>39</sup> and I started this project—do you know him?

Reiner KELLER: Yes.

Howard S. BECKER: So you know what he is like: a tireless worker.

Reiner KELLER: I can imagine, I have some of his books on my table.

Howard S. BECKER: So he went to Chicago, he buried himself in the library, in the archives. He collected so much information, it is really astounding. He made an enormous spreadsheet: 200 people who were graduate students, and hundreds of facts about each one. And then he started, I mean, the way it became a project for the both of us was: He started asking me questions and I would write long answers, and then he started to ask me: "Well this person. Was

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34 Emile DURKHEIM (1858-1917), one of the classical French founders of sociology, argued for a structure orientated analysis of "social facts" and social integration.

35 Georg SIMMEL (1858-1918), one of the classical German founders of sociology, arguing for a "formal" sociology interested in social forms of relationships, and for interaction and meaning orientated approaches. His concept of *Wechselwirkung* has been translated as "interaction," too. Robert E. PARK being his student for a while, several of SIMMEL's articles have been translated very early into English and became founding texts for Chicago urban sociology since the 1920s.

36 Erving GOFFMAN (1922-1982), Canadian sociologist who graduated from the University of Chicago and later became professor of sociology at University of California, Berkeley. His numerous writings on the ordering of interaction became worldwide famous. GOFFMAN was elected president of the *American Sociological Association* in 1981.

37 Alfred R. REDCLIFFE-BROWN (1881-1955), English social and cultural anthropologist strongly influenced by Emile DURKHEIM, worked on functions of social structures in non-Western societies (in Africa, Australia), e.g. on kinship, marriage and family. After teaching at several universities across the world (including the University of Chicago), he became professor at Oxford University, UK.

38 W. Lloyd WARNER (1898-1970), American anthropologist and sociologist, influenced by RADCLIFFE-BROWN and other classics of anthropology, became professor at the University of Chicago in 1935 where he started to conduct research on different American communities, democracy, American elites, class, and many other issues.

39 Daniel CEFAÏ, French sociologist at the Centre d'Études des Mouvements Sociaux [Centre for Social Movement Studies] (Ecole des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales) in Paris, has been working on the Chicago sociology history and approaches, collective action and pragmatist traditions for a long time now. He applied methods of field work in his own research on urgency care for homeless people in Paris.

he a member of the group? And this person, was he a member?" And I said: "What are you talking about, there was no group." [Laughter] He said: "Of course there was a group; you, Joseph GUSFIELD<sup>40</sup>, GOFFMAN ... ." No, it was not a group. There are all these other people, there were 200 people there, and that doesn't even count the ones who didn't graduate. I mean Herbert GANS<sup>41</sup> was very involved with a lot of us, and Herb and I are among the last people left of this. He never graduated from sociology in Chicago, he didn't even take a master's degree in sociology, it was in social science, and then he went to Pennsylvania and got a degree in planning. But you know, was he a member of the group? I mean the whole thing is a kind of stupid. It's like when people say that you were a symbolic interactionist. That is not the reality. But what happens, and this is really unfortunate, is that it becomes a kind of reality because so many people believe it. They don't read what these people have written [...]

Reiner KELLER: "Definition of the Situation"<sup>42</sup>, and its effects!

Howard S. BECKER: Yeah, I mean ... they just know everybody says it and why would everybody say it if it wasn't true. So therefore it is true.

Reiner KELLER: So one has to deal with the effects of this definition somehow. [49]

Howard S. BECKER: Oh I don't know what to do about it, because I realize, I have seen some very famous people do that. One that really shocked me was, you know who John SEARLE<sup>43</sup> is?

Reiner KELLER: Yes.

Howard S. BECKER: Well, I think he is an arrogant jerk, but ... . He wrote a book about ... was going to provide an ontology for the social sciences (SEARLE, 1995). It is the most stupid book you have ever read. He hasn't read anything in sociology, and then he also ... he and a number of his colleagues are offended by the idea that there is something relativistic about science. So they ... and LATOUR<sup>44</sup> is a favorite target. And so they quote from things of LATOUR, but they haven't actually read what they are quoting. There is a wonderful very short piece that Bruno wrote: "Did Ramses II die of tuberculosis?" (LATOUR, 2000), and Bruno says: "No, he could not have died of tuberculosis, it didn't exist." **Ah,**

40 Joseph GUSFIELD (1923-2015), American sociologist, earned his PhD at the University of Chicago in 1953, and later founded the sociological department at the University of California, San Diego. His work centered on social movements and collective action, with particular attention to moral attitudes to alcohol consumption.

41 Herbert GANS (\*1927), German born American sociologist who studied in Chicago and did his PhD in sociology and planning at the University of Pennsylvania. He later became professor of sociology at Columbia University, New York City, USA. His research focused on urban community transformation, the mass media, public policy and related issues.

42 This refers to a famous quote by early classic Chicago sociologist William I. THOMAS (1863-1947) and demographer Dorothy S. THOMAS (1899-1970) in their study on "The Child in America", where they state the so-called Thomas-Theorem: "If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences" (THOMAS & THOMAS, 1928, p.571).

43 John R. SEARLE (\*1932), American philosopher, professor of philosophy at University of California, Berkeley, became famous with his work on speech act theory.

44 Bruno LATOUR (\*1947), French philosopher, sociologist and anthropologist, one of the leading figures in today's social studies of science, did ethnographic work in a laboratory or at the French state council and many other places. He co-developed actor-network-theory and argues for a "parliament of things."

**that is ridiculous!"** But so they pay no attention to what he actually said, because he says how could ever it exist if no one had given it a name yet. He couldn't have died in the sense of a diagnosis established according to professionals. It's all obvious. And then they say also that Thomas KUHN (2012 [1962])<sup>45</sup> says: "A scientific revolution occurs when so many anomalies accumulate that they can't be ignored." That is exactly what KUHN does not say because he is very clear on this point. He says that is not when it happens. He says it happens when somebody tries to solve this [laughing], they try to fix it, and then people start having different ideas, and pretty soon the whole common understanding of what they are doing collapses. Then they make a revolution. It's in KUHN, it's there in so many words: "This is not, what I mean." But people like SEARLE they just ignore what he says. [50]

Reiner KELLER: I am more trained in the BERGER and LUCKMANN<sup>46</sup> tradition and "The social construction of reality" (BERGER & LUCKMANN, 1966) book. In Germany, that part of sociology of knowledge is close to lots of things you are doing, or at least to very similar perspectives. In a recent interview, when asked about your understanding of "social construction," you explained:

"'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" (BECKER in RALÓN & RALÓN, 2013, pp.4-5). [51]

And in another conversation, you state that you are not interested in identity politics via adhering to such theoretical positions as "symbolic interactionism," which we just talked about, or "constructivism" (BECKER & DANKO, 2015, p.163). In the case of "social construction" the concept furthermore seems to imply that this is not a realistic perspective [...]

Howard S. BECKER: Yes, yes.

Reiner KELLER: [...] but I know that LUCKMANN and BERGER claim to be realistic and they don't like the "social construction" title or words themselves.

Howard S. BECKER: Yeah, it's bad because it leads ... it lends itself to that kind of misinterpretation.

Reiner KELLER: Because SEARLE has been in that discussion with them, too.

Howard S. BECKER: Oh yeah, you know he is an arrogant fool ... [Laughter]

45 Thomas KUHN (1922-1996), American philosopher and historian of science who wrote a path-breaking book on paradigm shifts and scientific revolutions.

46 Peter L. BERGER (\*1929), Austrian born American sociologist of knowledge, religion, economic culture and modernization, was professor at Boston University.

Thomas LUCKMANN (\*1927), Slovenian born Austrian-American sociologist of knowledge, religion, and communication. After returning from the US to Germany and a short stay at then Western Germany's Frankfurt University, he became professor of sociology at the University of Konstanz. LUCKMANN retired in 1994.

Reiner KELLER: I will have to stop reading his books, stop reading what he is doing [...]

Howard S. BECKER: [...] and arrogant because he once wrote a review or something in the *New York Review of Books* and he in passing criticized some philosopher's paper about something or other, and then she wrote a letter to the editor saying: "Well unfortunately I didn't say what he attributes to me as saying. Here is the quotation, this is what I said ... ." So SEARLE said, well he wrote back and he said "I hadn't read her article at the time I wrote this but now I have and I am still right." I thought this is such a breach of scholarly ... how to behave. [52]

## 8. Telling About Sociology

Reiner KELLER: You made some interventions against the kind of ways of doing or establishing criteria for 'true scientific' qualitative research in the US, there has been a discussion on giving money or grants only if such criteria apply or something ... That was some time ago and this SEARLE intervention might have been part of that?

Howard S. BECKER: Well, that is so political. I mean there's not very much money for social science, there never was, and the money for social science, a very large proportion of it goes through the *General Social Survey*. Which now is one of those things where you have invested in it and now you have to keep investing in it [...]

Reiner KELLER: [...] keep it running [...]

Howard S. BECKER: Yes, keep it running. Because otherwise, you don't get the good of it. And NORC (National Opinion Research Center, University of Chicago)<sup>47</sup> has built up a big apparatus to make sure that it gets done every two years. And you are gonna take the money away? And what really is behind it is, they are very afraid of ... loose people, people they don't have any control over. Because the congress can look and see what they are giving money for and denounce them, and that used to happen all the time with natural science. [53]

Reiner KELLER: So they fear that very much?

Howard S. BECKER: Yes, they fear that very much, it's very obvious. When you are there you are able to see it, looking over their shoulders. What will happen if we give money for this? What senator can ridicule us? And you know the truth is: field research is not expensive. If you want to take time off from your university work, you know it's possible to do it. Lots of people have done it. Now under the present circumstances, when there you know is all this administrative work—because there is, increasingly, my friends in Great Britain complain terribly about what they call these assessment exercises, and you know it's [...]

Reiner KELLER: It's a big pressure [...]

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47 NORC "is an independent research institution that delivers reliable data and rigorous analysis to guide critical programmatic, business, and policy decisions" (<http://www.norc.org/Pages/default.aspx> [Accessed March: 1, 2016]).

Howard S. BECKER: [...] and there is all kinds of reports to make. It's a lot of work. And somebody has to do it. That's clear. [54]

Reiner KELLER: You said in the book "Telling About Society" (BECKER, 2007) at the very end, that you fear the tragedy if the arts disappear, but for sociology you are not sure [...]

Howard S. BECKER: It wouldn't be such a tragedy. [Laughter]

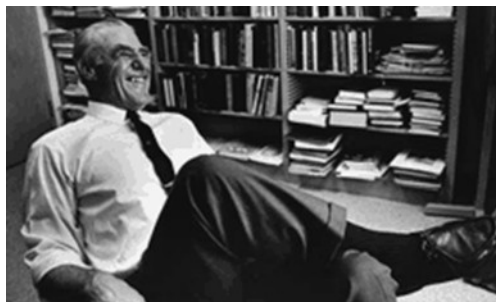
Reiner KELLER: I was wondering if—you have such a long experience in sociology. Did you observe some changes regarding the kind of relationship between sociology—which is a multi-discipline in itself, there's not **one** sociology—and its social reception in society? I was thinking about the concept of labeling which we talked about, or "big" concepts like "Risk Society"—I don't know if you are familiar with this, it was coined by the German sociologist Ulrich BECK (1992 [1986])<sup>48</sup>—which stated in 1986 that dealing with catastrophes and risks becomes the central issue in today's society, and then, 20-30 years later everybody thinks this is a kind of common concept, everyone is talking about ... no one does acknowledge anymore that the concept of "knowledge society" came out of sociological or social sciences research a long time ago [...]

Howard S. BECKER: It's all like this idea of "big data" [...]

Reiner KELLER: [...] and it changes the ways and directions of political thinking and decisions.

Howard S. BECKER: It has nothing to do with real sociology, at least I don't think. I mean, I'm very suspicious of everything that presents itself as: **Aha!** Now I see the direction that the world is taking—because it never, ever goes the way that it was predicted. [55]

Reiner KELLER: But would you say on a smaller level, for example, the work you did on "Art Worlds," the "Outsiders" book, or on the medical school teaching. Does it change the way people are looking at the situation in the field? Did you have this experience or reflection about what happens or happened then?



Photograph 4: Herbert Blumer [56]

Howard S. BECKER: It's hard to say. I am a student of Herbert BLUMER<sup>49</sup>, too. And BLUMER's notion of how change occurs is more what he called ... What did

48 Ulrich BECK (1944-2015), one of the most influential Post World War II German sociologists, worked on sociological diagnostics of current societal transformations.

he call it? "Cultural drift" (see BLUMER, 1939), or something like that. You don't even see it happening. It's like the glaciers melting. You know, if you go looking, with a magnifying glass, are you going to see glaciers melting? No.

Reiner KELLER: Just a very very small puzzle piece [...]

Howard S. BECKER: And I mean look at what happened with homosexuality all over the world, in all the advanced countries. It seems like suddenly, suddenly it's OK. Before it was not OK, in Britain they were hounding people to death, you know, sixty years ago.

Reiner KELLER: And not far away, in Eastern Europe and elsewhere, it's still not OK. [57]

Howard S. BECKER: Right. Or in Africa. But, all of a sudden, people look around and ... Years ago a friend of mine, Gertrude SELZNICK<sup>50</sup>, was doing a survey, it was about anti-Semitism. She said "You know what's happening? What people say now is like—they had a question, because they knew nobody would admit to being an anti-Semite: "Have you heard anything bad said about the Jews lately?" She said, people used to say, and this is a long time ago: "Yes," or "No." Now they look at the interviewers and they say: "Don't you know nobody talks like that anymore?" It's very different. And in the next generation they didn't hear it, so now it doesn't exist. That's all over. When I was a kid in Chicago, I had a good friend, a drummer, Rudy RICUPERO. He was Italian, I mean, his family maybe came from Italy. He lived in the older town Italian neighborhood. A lot of people would look at the holiday time for a temporary job in a store, in a big store in the center of the city, like stock employee, because they needed a lot of extra help. He said, he tried to get a job like that, but when they saw his address, 1052 Taylor Street, people in Chicago knew: That was the old Italian neighborhood. But he had an aunt, who lived elsewhere, and he would give her address, then he would get the job. I mean it's that kind of change. One of the things that amused me for years is the—I call it the "Our youth are going to hell" syndrome. In the 1920s American youth were going to hell because of the movies, the silent movies. Then they were going to hell because of the talking movies. Then they were going to hell because of the radio, or comic books. It was one thing after another, it was always the same argument. [58]

Reiner KELLER: Yeah, it was the same in the 19th century about reading books.

Howard S. BECKER: Yeah, so the answer is the youth is always going to hell, until they grow up and then they see the youth. Every one of these things is done so seriously. Now everyone is going to hell because of portable phones. Walking down the street. [Laughter] [59]

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49 Herbert G. BLUMER (1900-1987), American sociologist, name giver and one of the main protagonists of "symbolic interactionism," worked on theory and methodology of sociology as well as on race issues and movies. He taught at the University of Chicago from 1925-1952 and then moved to the University of California, Berkeley, where he presided the sociological department. In 1952 he became president of the *American Sociological Association*.

50 Gertrude SELZNICK JAEGER (1915-1979), professor of sociology at the University of California, Berkeley. Major areas of work: anti-Semitism and racism.



Reiner KELLER: Yeah, but this might cause just very real accidents. It seems that some countries are thinking about regulations of using them in public spaces. We talked about LATOUR, and in the "Telling About Society" book there are a lot of references to science studies, and I think you are very close to that. There's a difference about the role of things ... But I would just like to ask you maybe in conclusion: If you're looking around what happens in sociology—what is some work you would like to refer people to, to make them read it? You mentioned some books in our conversation. In the book you're pointing to older studies, to which it would be wonderful to get back to. But in today's sociology, are there some things you really find interesting? Or is this more outside sociology?

Howard S. BECKER: Oh in sociology for sure, all the time. There is this wonderful history of French rap music by Karim HAMMOU (2012). And then Alice GOFFMAN's work on black young men and the police (GOFFMAN, 2014). Claudio BENZECRY (2011) interviewed all the fans of the Colón Opera House in Buenos Aires who devote their lives to the opera. Or Collin JEROLMACK's (2013) fantastic intercontinental fieldwork on the human-animal relations in the case of pigeons. Just to name a few, and sorry for all the others worth mentioning. I'm always reading new things. There's a lot of good stuff. My real complaint is that people don't read anything. [60]

Reiner KELLER: So they just start ignorant working, writing?

Howard S. BECKER: They hear about it. People are talking about that. When I say to people "Do you know this book?" I mean, I don't think anybody reads Thomas KUHN's book. They all know about it. They all know "scientific revolution," "paradigm." They've got the words, but they don't know what he said. [61]

Reiner KELLER: It's part of the canon, the tradition, but they don't work with it.

Howard S. BECKER: They don't actually read it. Who reads? Or the great classics, like "Deep South" (DAVIS, BRADFORD & GARDNER, 2009 [1941]), this is a great problem. I mean I could teach years of courses from Everett HUGHES' collected papers (HUGHES, 1984a). They're so full of ideas. [62]

Reiner KELLER: He has been to Germany, too. I think after World War II.

Howard S. BECKER: Oh yeah, he was there first in the thirties, about 1930, he wrote about the Catholic workers in the German Rhineland (HUGHES, 1984b [1935]), and then he was there after the war. Yeah, he wrote that famous paper "Good People and Dirty Work" (HUGHES, 1962). [63]

Reiner KELLER: I was wondering about his impact on German sociology after the war. There are no references, but there is kind of work done on workers and places, which seems to me, some of it has the spirit of HUGHES.

Howard S. BECKER: I don't know what his connections were in Germany.

Reiner KELLER: It's difficult to get access to that.

Howard S. BECKER: [...] but he was one of the few people who read German, read French. He was quite at home in both languages, and he made use of it. He

gave up trying to persuade people like me to learn a language. I'm ashamed of myself it took me so many years. [64]

Reiner KELLER: But you did—you learned Portuguese and French, too.

Howard S. BECKER: And it has been well you see, so useful to me. Among other things it gave me wonderfully interesting cases to think with.

Reiner KELLER: Maybe we'll stop there. Thank you very much

Howard S. BECKER: You're welcome. Call again. [65]

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