

THE OUTSIDE GAME

How the sociologist Howard Becker studies the conventions of the unconventional.

BY ADAM GOPNIK



Americans have often had strange and serendipitous careers in Paris, from Thomas Evans, the Philadelphia dentist who cured Emperor Louis-Napoleon of a toothache and became an indispensable ornament of the Imperial court, to those African-American jazzmen, like the great soprano-sax player Sidney Bechet, whose careers were revived, and reputations nurtured, in France in ways they never could have been in America. But few have known an odder trajectory than Howie—“Only my mother ever called me Howard”—Becker. Howard S. Becker, to give him his full, honorary-degree name—he has six—has

been a major figure in American sociology for more than sixty years. Now a brisk eighty-six, he remains most famous for the studies collected in his book “Outsiders,” of 1963, which transformed sociologists’ ideas of what it means to be a “deviant.” In America’s academic precincts, he is often seen as a sort of Richard Feynman of the social sciences, notable for his street smarts, his informal manner, and his breezy, pungent prose style—a Northwestern professor who was just as at home playing piano in saloons. (Indeed, the observations that put him on the path to academic fame, on the subculture of marijuana smokers, began

while he was playing jazz piano in Chicago strip joints. “Not burlesque houses,” he says. “These were strip joints.”)

Yet it is his position in France that is truly astonishing. Two critical biographies of Becker have been published in French in the past decade, and “Beckerisme” has become an ideology to conjure with. YouTube videos capture him speaking heavily accented Chicago French to student audiences, and he now spends a good part of every year in Paris, giving seminars and holding court. His work is required reading in many French universities, even though it seems to be a model of American pragmatism, preferring narrow-seeming “How?” and “Who, exactly?” questions to the deeper “Why?” and “What?” supposedly favored by French theory. That may be exactly its appeal, though: for the French, Becker seems to combine three highly American elements—jazz, Chicago, and the exotic beauties of empiricism.

This summer, Becker published a summing up of his life’s method and beliefs, called “What About Mozart? What About Murder?” (The title refers to the two caveats or complaints most often directed against his kind of sociology’s equable “relativism”: how can you study music as a mere social artifact—what about Mozart? How can you consider criminal justice a mutable convention—what about Murder?) The book is both a jocular personal testament of faith and a window into Becker’s beliefs. His accomplishment is hard to summarize in a sentence or catchphrase, since he’s resolutely anti-theoretical and suspicious of “models” that are too neat. He wants a sociology that observes the way people act around each other as they really do, without expectations about how they ought to. Over the decades, this has led him to do close, almost novelistic studies of jazz musicians, medical students, painters, and photographers.

Among sociologists, he’s most famous for having made sociology’s previous theories of “deviance” look deviant: studying obscure or out groups, he has shown that the way their members act together follows the same kinds of rules that everyone else follows.

Celebrated in France, the piano-playing scholar changed how we think about “deviance.”

Some people may march to a different drummer—but, when they do, they're usually all marching in rhythm, too. As one of his students has written, "Rather than asking the less than fruitful question of why people break rules, Becker came to focus on how people go through an identifiable process to *choose* to break rules." A Beckerian analysis of a social "world" asks how, in any culture or subculture, someone comes to be called an insider while someone else gets pushed outside. Simple as it is, this approach has proved immensely influential in the study of everything from drug addiction to queer theory. Basically, Becker believes that Yogi Berra was right: you really can observe the most by watching. Heather Love, a professor of English at Penn who specializes in gender and sexuality studies, points out that it shares "many of the same concerns, about institutions, power, the dynamics of social relations" as contemporary post-structuralist research, "but all in this kind of homegrown, ordinary language, a 'just the facts, ma'am' style that has the appeal of American noir and hardboiled fiction."

Not long ago, in an apartment that he and his wife, Dianne Hagaman, had taken for the fall in the Fifth Arrondissement—the neighborhood of Paris that clusters around the old Sorbonne—he sat and talked about his life's work and its apotheosis in Paris, almost as a spectator of his own surprising career. As long-faced and dry-eyed as a stoical silent comedian, Becker is game to talk about anything. A conversation with him becomes an inimitable spool of bebop piano tips, Chicago history, sociological minutiae, and meditations on French intellectual life, with helpful detours into strip-club culture in the forties and the reasons that French professors think of themselves as civil servants while American ones imagine themselves as entrepreneurs.

"I always really wanted to be a piano player," he begins. "When I was about twelve, I heard boogie-woogie for the first time and fell in love with it. My folks had bought a piano for show, and I bought a book of boogie-woogie and taught myself to play it, more or less. And then I met some kids in the neigh-

borhood—you see, I went to Austin High." Austin High was the citadel of Chicago jazz, where, in the twenties, Bud Freeman had helped create a form of excited, driven white-folks jazz that remained influential through the swing era. "I got jobs for people who couldn't afford real musicians—thirteen-year-old kids playing for other thirteen-year-old kids." Then he got into a better band, which was racially mixed. "That was a big thing," he says. "Because we were racially mixed, we played only black dances. The kids who were at the black dances, if you didn't play those pieces exactly the way they were on the record, you were in trouble. So I took lessons from Lennie Tristano. When I met him, he was in his late twenties and had already stopped playing in public—he wouldn't put up with anything other than perfect playing conditions, with the result that he almost never played."

Tristano, who was a saxophonist as well as a pianist, was the Glenn Gould of bebop: difficult, hypersensitive, reclusive, and hugely gifted. "Instead of teaching 'freedom,' or creativity, Tristano taught me a set of practices that create the feeling of what an improvisation ought to sound like," Becker says. Tristano taught simple ways of solving puzzles that come up in improvising—for instance, ways of adding flattened fifths and minor ninths to otherwise too familiar chord sequences. "He showed how to create an essentially unlimited set of possibilities to work with as I played through an evening in a bar," Becker recalls. Jazz solos, he learned from his models, were concocted almost entirely "from a small collection of 'crips,' short phrases that can be combined in a million ways, subjected to all possible variations." The lesson that social performance, even of the highest kind, was more a string of crips than an outpouring of confessions remained at the root of Becker's understanding of the way the world works.

Knowing that his father, a first-generation Jewish immigrant, would "have a kitten" at the thought of his son spending his life playing piano in saloons, Becker enrolled in the University of Chicago—then at the height of its Robert Hutchins-era reputation as a cita-

del of great books and no sports—so that he could be seen to study all day in order to be free to play jazz all night. "I started working strip joints on Clark Street—all the grownups were in the Army. We played the one independent, non-Mob-owned joint. Guys would come in from the hybrid-seed-corn convention and spend three or four thousand dollars buying drinks for the girls. Then they'd go away happy."

He planned to get a graduate degree in English while continuing his jazz life, and then one day he stumbled on a new book, "Black Metropolis: A Study of Negro Life in a Northern City"—the northern city being Chicago—by St. Clair Drake and Horace Cayton. It was one of the first in-depth studies of contemporary urban life. "It was wonderful, the whole idea of being an urban anthropologist!" Becker says. "You could be an anthropologist, a very romantic thing, but you didn't have to go away to do it. Some of the anthropologists I knew lost half their teeth. Not nice. I thought, Wow! If I just wrote down what I was doing at night, just what everyone said and what I observed, then those were field notes."

Those "field notes" gathered at the strip clubs and night spots helped inspire a seminal paper of 1953, "Becoming a Marihuana User," in the *American Journal of Sociology*. (Asked if he knew so much because he was smoking weed himself, he says, "Yeah. Obviously." And does he still smoke it? "Yeah. Obviously.") Becker insists that his accomplishment in the paper was no more than the elimination of a single needless syllable: "Instead of talking about drug abuse, I talked about drug *use*." "Deviance" had long been a preoccupation of sociology and its mother field, anthropology. Most "deviance theory" took it for granted that if you did weird things you were a weird person. Normal people made rules—we'll crap over here, worship over here, have sex like so—which a few deviants in every society couldn't keep. They clung together in small bands of misbehavior.

Becker's work set out to show that out-groups weren't made up of people who couldn't keep the rules; they

were made up of people who kept other kinds of rules. Marijuana smoking, too, was a set of crips, a learned activity and a social game. At a time when the general assumption was that drug use was private and compulsive, Becker argued that you had to *learn* how to get high. Smoking weed, he showed, was most often strange or unpleasant at first. One of his informants (a fellow band member) reported, "I walked around the room, walking around the room trying to get off, you know; it just scared me at first, you know. I wasn't used to that kind of feeling." Another musician explained, "You have to just talk them out of being afraid. Keep talking to them, reassuring, telling them it's all right. And come on with your own story, you know: 'The same thing happened to me. You'll get to like that after a while.'" In the sociologese that Becker had not yet entirely discarded, he wrote, "Given these typically frightening and unpleasant first experiences, the beginner will not continue use unless he learns to redefine the sensations as pleasurable." He went on, "This redefinition occurs, typically, in interaction with more experienced users, who, in a number of ways, teach the novice to find pleasure in this experience, which is at first so frightening." What looked like a deviant act by an escape-seeking individual was simply a communal practice shaped by a com-

mon enterprise: it takes a strip club to smoke a reefer.

The lessons learned in the night clubs remain present even today. In his new *Mozart/Murder* book, Becker points out the continuities between the middle-class housewives of the early twentieth century who became addicted to the opium products then sold over the counter for "women's troubles" and black youths who now take essentially the same kinds of drug, in a different world: "When middle-class women could buy opium, they did, and they got addicted. When they couldn't, they didn't. When poor black boys could buy it, they did, and they got addicted, too." In Becker's work, a small realism of social scenes replaces the melodrama of personal pathology.

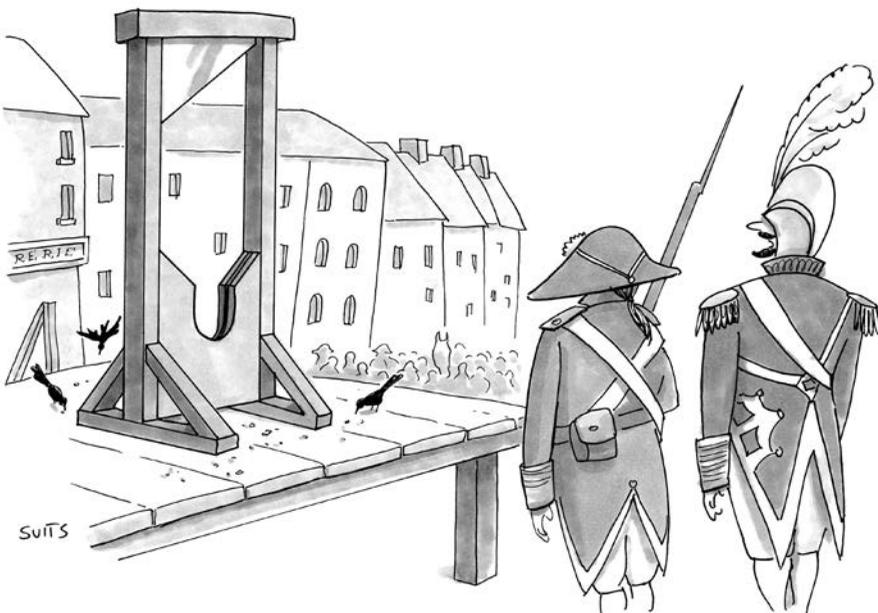
Becker also points out that any social group, insider or outsider, ends by divorcing itself from the group it's supposed to be serving. "Everyone has an ideal student or audience in mind, and we never get them," he points out. This makes teachers impatient with students, and jazz musicians suspicious of audiences. Jazz musicians smoked weed to get high, but one of the effects was to set them off from the night-club-going customers they despised. "This insight looks original only now," Becker says. "If you were playing, that was all you heard: 'Fucking squares, now look what they want!' I remember learning

to leave the stand quickly, before any one could ask me to play 'Melancholy Baby.' That was the stuff of every minute of what you were doing." He adds, "The originality—I shouldn't even call it that—was to pay attention to it as something worth talking about."

This insight turned out to apply to a lot more than marijuana smokers. "My dissertation supervisor, Everett Hughes, loved the idea that anything you see in the lowly kind of work is there in privileged work, too, only they don't talk about it," he says. "Later on, he went to the American nurses' association and they hired him as a consultant, and he said, 'Let's do some real research: why don't you talk about how nurses hate patients?'" There was a shocked silence and then someone said, "How did you know that?"

The influence of Becker's early work remains profound. A presidential lecture he gave in 1966 at the annual meeting of the Society for the Study of Social Problems, entitled "Whose Side Are We On?," is still a clarion in the field. Gayle Rubin, a professor of anthropology at Michigan and a leading scholar of L.G.B.T. studies, praises it as a pioneering attempt at "moral levelling," where the old prudish act of exposing deviants and curing them of deviance changed to the project of finding out what deviants did, and why it was, on inspection, usually no more deviant than what the rest of us did. "That stuff at Chicago in the fifties really lit the way for so much of what came after," Rubin says. "There's a real renaissance of it now."

Becker insists that he never entirely intended to stay in academia: "It was only after I finished the Ph.D. that I more or less realized that my choice now was to be the most educated piano player on Sixty-third Street or start taking sociology more seriously." Suspicious of the administrative details of academic life, he lived on research grants, passing from college campus to institutional setting—"For fourteen or fifteen years, I was what was called a 'research bum.'" Following the lead of his first wife, Nan Harris, who was a ceramic sculptor, he decided to write about the visual arts. "But I had this disability—I couldn't draw!" he says. Living in San Francisco for a while, he



"The bagels—they just keep getting bigger, no?"

took up photography instead, and was lucky enough to have as the “lab monitor,” who mixed chemicals and helped students, a young woman named Annie Leibovitz. His experiences as a working photographer, like his earlier ones as a working jazzman, illuminated what eventually became his second important book, “Art Worlds” (1982), which advanced a collaborative view of picture-making. Like reefer-smoking among jazz musicians, artmaking was not the business of solitary artists, inspired by visions, but a social enterprise in which a huge range of people played equally essential roles in order to produce an artifact that a social group decided to dignify as art. Art, like weed, exists only within a world.

It was a quarter-century ago, with the publication of “Art Worlds” and “Outsiders” in France, that the strange second act of Becker’s career began. His books became a magnetic pole around which dissident French sociologists could gather. A group of social scientists calling themselves L’École de Chicago de Paris translated “Outsiders,” and saw it become a campus best-seller. (Becker: “I think because it worked well as a textbook, being sort of leftish—really, just unconventional about things like deviance—and easy to read, which was a great combination to give to undergraduates.”) But the book also provided a means to combat the man who, for a generation, had been the dominant figure in French social science, Pierre Bourdieu.

Becker’s role as the American not-Bourdieu is so essential to his reputation in France that, in talking about Becker, one invariably also talks about his other. Bourdieu, who died in 2002, was a sociologist whose work—brilliantly disenthralled or grimly determinist, depending on your perspective—explained all social relations as power relations, even in a seemingly open world of “free expression” like the visual arts. For Bourdieu, whose book “Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste” (1979) remains a classic text on the sociology of culture, a dominant class reproduces itself by enforcing firm rules about what is and is not acceptable, and creates a closed, exclusive language to describe it: those

who have power decide what counts as art, and to enter that field at all is possible for outsiders only if they learn to repeat the words that construct its values.

One of the most agitated debates in French social science today is between Bourdieu’s and Becker’s conceptions of the realm in which our lives take place. Bourdieu believed that all social life takes place in a “field” and Becker insists that it takes place within a “world”—an opposition that irresistibly brings to mind Woody Allen’s remark that while Democritus called the indivisible units of the universe “atoms” Leibniz called them “monads,” and that fortunately the two men never met or there would have been an extremely dull argument. The argument about fields and worlds, as Becker freely admits, is a bit like that one—both are generalized metaphors—but he also thinks it can be saved from a mere dispute over nomenclature.

“Bourdieu’s big idea was the *champs*, field, and mine was *monde*, world—what’s the difference?” Becker asks rhetorically. “Bourdieu’s idea of field is kind of mystical. It’s a metaphor from physics. I always imagined it as a zero-sum game being played in a box. The box is full of little things that zing around. And he doesn’t speak about people. He just speaks about forces. There aren’t any people doing anything.” People in Bourdieu’s field are merely atom-like entities. (It was Bourdieu’s vision that helped inspire Michel Houellebecq’s nihilistic novel of the meaningless collisions of modern life, “The Elementary Particles.”)

“Mine is a view that—well, it takes a village to write a symphony and get it performed,” Becker goes on. “It’s not just the composer. The great case for me is in film, because nobody ever figured out who the real artist is: the screenwriter or the director or who? Or, rather, *everybody* figured it out, but never figured out the same thing. Early on when I was reading about art, I read a book by Aljean Harmetz on the making of ‘The Wizard of Oz.’ She was the daughter of someone in the wardrobe department of M-G-M, and she explains that there were four directors of that film, and the guys who thought of the crucial thing, the change from

black-and-white to color when the characters enter Oz, were the composer and the lyricist! In an important way, I took the list of credits at the end of a Hollywood film as my model of how artistic creation really happens.”

As Becker has written elsewhere, enlarging the end-credits metaphor, “A ‘world’ as I understand it consists of real people who are trying to get things done, largely by getting other people to do things that will assist them in their project. . . . The resulting collective activity is something that perhaps no one wanted, but is the best everyone could get out of this situation and therefore what they all, in effect, agreed to.” In a Beckerian world, we act the way we do because of a certain logic of events—jazz musicians are supposed to smoke dope, graduate students learn how to please their supervisors—but there are lots of different roles within the world, and we can choose which one to play, and how to play it. We’re all actors, not angels or completely free agents. But we are looking for applause, so we put on the best show we can. This view of the world has something in common with that of Becker’s longtime friend and colleague Erving Goffman. “But Goffman got more interested in the micro-dramatics of things,” Becker points out, meaning, for instance, his studies of how people look when they lie. “I was always more interested in the big picture.”

After a morning’s talk, Becker makes his way, steadily if slowly, around the corner to his favorite lunchtime bistro, where he is well known, and, seated at a corner table by the glass façade, orders a *steak frites*. His fingers tap on the tabletop: he still plays the piano, and plays it well. Just last year, he issued a new CD of himself working over some standards. “Many years after studying with Lennie,” he recalls, “I was in New York and on a whim called him up at his home, somewhere on Long Island. We schmoozed for a while and he congratulated me on my success as a sociologist and then said, ‘You know? I always liked the way you played. Why don’t you quit your job and move to New York and study with me again?’ I had a momentary feeling

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

About her: the air, warm as fact.

An imaginary boat heading off to hell, her foot pushing it offshore.

The sunlit bank, a mirage of the perfect past.

She was barking at the waves, thinking they barked first.

But this was not a river. It was Thursday, a word cast in lead.

Her eye had turned the water into sky.

The poet is a trespasser.

The poet is the king of Rome, New York, with one foot in a boat and one against the snowy shore of reason.

Wondering if, like a boy, she could go there for a season.

—Elizabeth Willis

that, yes, that’s what I should do! But I overcame it.”

Becker is aware of the irony that, while he remains on the “left” of American sociology, as a moral leveller, he is on the right of the French kind, as an apostle of agency and action. He is more than willing to apply detached Beckerian analysis to his role in France. “In France, people say about another professor, I would cross the street to avoid him! But in America we wouldn’t be on the same street. A lot of what happens involves the difference in the size of the country and the centralization of the universities. People can have hegemony of a sort in an American school, but not really. You’re going to take over the departments at Berkeley and Stanford and Harvard and Yale and at all the smaller places where the real energies are simmering anyway? Doesn’t happen.” He thinks it over for a minute, between bites of *onglet* and courteous chat with the bistro’s owner. “You know what the real problem with Bourdieu was? The real problem with Bourdieu was that he was a schmuck,” he says at last. “Power-hungry and mean in spirit and obsessed with career.”

Becker tries to observe his own ascendancy in France with the same de-

tachment with which he observes other people, but his appeal to the French goes beyond his simply not being Bourdieu. The French myth of America is as robust as the American myth of France, and one important element in it is the idea that Americans can arrive intuitively at results that the French can get to only by thinking a lot. Like the Hollywood moviemakers whom the French New Wave critics adopted in the fifties and sixties, Becker is beloved in Paris in part because he doesn’t seem overencumbered with theory or undue abstraction. As Heather Love also points out, “U.S. deviance studies has the international allure of American crime fiction, and with a cool narrator like Becker, all the better.”

But, to his French admirers, this doesn’t disprove the need for theory; it just means that sometimes the best theories are left mysteriously unspoken. That Howard Hawks made so many good movies without actually having a theory of moviemaking was a strong sign that he must really have a fantastic theory of the movies, if he would only tell you. Becker’s reputation is a bit like that: if you can say so many interesting things just by watching the world, then you must really have a

fantastic set of prescription spectacles, even if no one ever gets to see you wearing them.

Over lunch, Becker discusses a question that rises above personality clashes and institutional leanings. The project of moral levelling also has within it the problem of moral levelling. What is the point of sociology if it can't tell us that murder is bad or Mozart is great? Surely we don't want to expand our equanimity about out-groups to, say, the Gambino family, whose rules include whacking people they don't like, or the Manson family, who had rules and rituals, too? For Becker, though, these objections involve a "category mistake." Yes, murder is wrong, but why is it the job of social sciences to remind us of that fact?

"How does it really happen isn't the only question, sure," he says. "It's just the one with the biggest chance of having an interesting answer rather than a predictable, safe one. I'm interested in how power happens, not just saying, 'Oh, the exercise of power.'" One of his favorite instances of how power works involves the role of the invisible middlemen who create places for themselves in the muddled center of any bureaucracy—in Brazil, where he lived for a while, they're called *despachantes*, but a student of Becker's has found close equivalents in Chicago laundromats, where they ease the burden of the welfare system. "They get power by knowing the rules on the box in greater detail than anyone else," Becker says. "They're the people you turn to to break the code of the system. That kind of 'how' of power interests me more than the fact of power.

"What does sociology bring to the table? Well, I'd expand the definition of sociology. Calvino, in 'Invisible Cities,' is a sociologist. Robert Frank, in 'The Americans'—that's sociology. There's a thing that I'm sure David Mamet said once, though I've never been able to track it to its source. He was talking about the theatre, and he said that everyone is in a scene for a reason. Everyone has something he wants. Everyone has some plan he's trying to pull off. 'What's the reason?' is the real question. So that's what you do. It's like you're watching a play and you—you're the guy who knows that everyone is there for a reason." ♦