

A Tribute to Howard S. Becker: a prominent sociologist and a dear friend

from Alain Quemin

How best to pay tribute to Howard S. Becker (born in 1928 in Chicago and died in 2023 in San

Francisco)? He will undoubtedly be remembered as a prominent sociologist but also as a beloved friend. And having known him for the last 30 years or so, I am absolutely sure that he would have preferred to be remembered as a dear friend and, even more fundamentally, as a good man, rather than the prominent social scientist that he also was.

Everyone called him Howie, and he liked to joke that, apart from his mother, no one had really ever called him Howard. His career as a social scientist was unusually long, not only thanks to his exceptionally long life but also as, after having studied and practiced sociology starting from an early age, he remained active in the social sciences long after he officially retired. Howie was actually more of a social scientist than a sociologist, not being very fond of disciplinary barriers, even though he held sociology in high esteem, and did not express it in a very formal way (he was anything but formal!). But as he used to frame it in the form of a joke (French people would say “une boutade” which has no perfect equivalent in English but is similar to a wisecrack) that he told with his friends when we had informal conversations, ‘if it’s interesting, it’s sociology!’. There was no need to define boundaries, especially disciplinary ones; what mattered most was the heuristic value of the analysis or the purpose. And if he practiced sociology or the social sciences for so many years, it is precisely because he found them very interesting.

Reading Howie's writings was always fascinating, but dialoguing with him was an exceptional experience. As lauded as he might have been, he never considered himself superior to his audience and always remained crystal clear in his explanations, especially in their formulation. Not only did he always present things in a very simple way, he always spoke very clearly and rather slowly and, when listening to him, his interlocutors could not miss his penetrating bright blue eyes.

Of course, in the academic field, Howie will mostly be remembered for his two major contributions / books: *Outsiders. Studies in the Sociology of Deviance* (published in 1963 at the Free Press of Glencoe) and *Art Worlds* (published in 1982 by University of California Press).

It would be difficult for anyone having studied sociology and, among other domains, the sociology of arts, never to have read (or at least heard of) these two major references. More generally, as he grew older, Howie became increasingly interested in (qualitative) methodology, and he wrote extensively on the topic. He never renounced his compositional trademark which consisted of formulating very subtle ideas in a perfectly accessible form.

Unlike other sociologists, even some who belonged to the interactionist tradition as he clearly did, Howie never thought that a social scientist should maintain some distance with their readers but, conversely, that they should be easy to understand. Clarity was unquestionably one of the many commendable qualities of his writings.

Throughout his whole life, and even at a very advanced age, Howie was highly curious and systematically refused to live in the past. He constantly remained extremely humble and refused to become a witness of the glorious age of the Chicago school of sociology that his own writings had contributed to building. He was so accessible, and so reluctant to being made into the role of father figure of the discipline, or even that of a proper star, that his reactions could sometimes be somewhat unexpected for those who did not know him personally. My other dear friend, the French professor of sociology Jean-Christophe Marcel, told me how embarrassed he had been one

day that he had invited Howie, who was already advanced in age and highly renowned, to an event where students literally jumped on him wanting him to sign copies of his books! Although some colleagues would have felt honored and flattered, Howie obviously felt very ill at ease with these gestures of admiration that were so openly expressed and, as always, he refused to play the role of superstar of the discipline.

As Howie was such a recognized sociologist (his passing was announced in several general newspapers in France, not only in sociological journals), and as all those who are interested in his body of work can find all relevant information on Wikipedia and read the numerous marvelous books and articles that he wrote, I would prefer to focus on personal anecdotes that some of my readers may not have heard, but that will inevitably shed light on Howie's personality. A fabulous one at that.

I met Howie in a very revealing context. At the time, at the beginning of the 1990's, I was working on a PhD dissertation under the supervision of Raymonde Moulin that analyzed the sociologies of art and professions, but I also worked as a research assistant for Geneviève Paicheler, a sociologist who specialized in my second domain of research. I regularly worked for her in her research center, the Cermès, which focused on the sociology of health and illness (a field that included the profession of medicine and all occupations dealing with health). I spent my days in the library of the research center, and as my elder colleagues there were all very considerate to me – and I am still grateful to them for this – they would systematically introduce me to any visiting international colleagues, especially the most recognized ones such as Marcel Fournier, Eliot Freidson and ... Howie. I may have been in my early twenties, and in spite of the age difference and of the fact that I was still only a beginner in sociology, all these very accomplished sociologists, especially Howie, were very friendly to me. They and he were smart enough to acknowledge that young sociologists are the ones who have most time to undertake extensive and fruitful fieldwork, and since that time, Howie and I communicated on a more or less regular basis. At the end of the 1990's, once I had become an associate professor of sociology at Metz university, in the East of France near the German border, I had the opportunity to spend several days with Howie. My colleagues had had the great idea to invite him and Eliot Freidson to

speaking at a conference. Among the various activities that were organized was a cruise on a barge during which we were supposed to converse with Howie and Eliot. The boat made dreadful noises, and I am not quite sure that the material conditions that we provided our two invited professors were the very best ones, especially for such prominent sociologists, but they did not even complain and remained very simple and accessible for everyone. One of my colleagues was of Jewish origin and knowing that he shared this trait with Howie and Eliot, as evidenced by their last names, he offered to take them to the local synagogue for shabbat. I will never forget Howie and Eliot's faces when they had to politely decline the invitation, being very amused and (just a little) horrified. A synagogue was the last place they wanted to spend their time, especially when visiting France! It was clear that, at least at that time, no one could have been less religiously inclined than they both were and they were visibly surprised to be reminded of their Jewish origins. Many years later, when I had become much closer to Howie, I asked him if he knew where his ancestors came from as his family name was not really associated with a specific European country. Once again, Howie was quite amused by the question and, after answering very seriously that his family roots linked him to the Baltic countries, he added as a joke: "My ancestor was a Jewish Viking!". I just loved that answer. Howie had no inclination for closed communities and was, on the contrary, very openminded in all domains.

This also was reflected in an answer that he gave me on another occasion in Metz. As a rather naïve young sociologist, I found it appropriate to ask him and Eliot what they thought about the sociology of Pierre Bourdieu. They both looked up and they simultaneously answered: "Big theory!". It was clear that it was definitely not their cup of tea, that elaborated or complex sociological theory was not their thing, but they were graceful enough not to criticize a colleague who, already at the time, occupied a central place in the sociological field in France and was also constantly gaining international recognition.

At the very end of the 1990's and the turn of the millennium, Howie and I regularly met up during the conferences of the CNRS (the French National Center of Scientific Research) labelled and funded *Opus Research Group*, which focused on the sociology of works of art

that was led by Alain Pessin and directly supported by Bruno Péquignot.

Howie's incredible intellectual curiosity, even later in his life, led him to learn French, and after several years of learning, his ability in the language was quite impressive. For many years, every year in the autumn, he would spend several months in Paris, always with his beloved partner, Dianne Hagaman, with whom he shared the last 35 years of his life. Every year, Howie, Dianne, my close friend Clara Lévy and I would share a lunch together. Howie was something of a foodie as he always wanted to fully enjoy the simple pleasures in life. In the US, when he no longer had professional obligations, and although he was so strongly associated with the Chicago school of sociology, Howie and Dianne decided to settle in San Francisco, which probably is the most "European" city in the US. They especially enjoyed this city for the quality of life it offers. Why did Howie decide to learn French? At a time when Raymonde Moulin's book *Le marché de la peinture en France*, which was initially published in 1967, had not been published in English, Howie was fascinated that there could be such a thing as the sociology of art. He most likely realized that, although his own book *Outsiders*, especially with its analyses of jazz clubs, had always been associated with the sociology of deviance, it could also be considered a contribution to the sociology of art! Since he wanted to understand Raymonde Moulin's book, Howie decided he needed to learn French. Raymonde and Howie later met and became friends, until they had an argument and no longer kept in touch. I always suspected that Raymonde, who had clearly been a progressist in her younger years, had become much more morally conservative in her 80's and 90's and had let Howie know that she disapproved of the significant age difference between him and Dianne. Raymonde was wrong: Howie and Dianne's relationship was undoubtedly a very happy one and probably explains Howie's longevity (at least in part) as his life partner took such good care of him. Dianne even helped me to better understand why jazz clubs were so controversial at the time Howie had studied them. Of course, people would stay awake late into the night, and weed was not exceptional (to say the least...), but what I had never read (or what I had forgotten) in Howie's writings is that there were strip tease artists performing in the clubs while jazz musicians were playing! In puritanical America, this was definitely too much!

These are just a few personal memories that I wanted to share as a loving tribute to Howie.

The inspirational sociologist has gone but his valuable writings can still inspire us. The marvelous friend and the good man is, and will always be, irreplaceable.

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