

An overview of French Interactionist Sociology

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Les mondes pluriels de Howard S. Becker: travail sociologique et sociologie du travail

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In recent years, several books were published in France to pay homage to the foundational works of Howard S. Becker (see for example Blanc and Pessin 2004 and Benghozi and Paris 2013). *Les mondes pluriels d'Howard Becker* is one of those. The book is the result of a conference that took place in Lausanne in October 2011 entitled *Héritage interactionniste en sociologie du travail*,¹ which is based on the discourse and texts written specifically for this publication. The authors are from the Swiss universities of Fribourg and Lausanne, as well as from different French universities, except of Howard S. Becker.

The diffusion of interactionist sociology in France happened very slowly, as compared to Great Britain for example. As Jean-Michel Chapoulie² explains in his chapter of the book, interactionist authors only started to be known and translated in France after 1980. He gives some grounds for this late diffusion. First, French sociology was for a long time a minor academic discipline mainly depending on philosophy. When the first sociologists were hired at the CNRS³ in the fifties, they needed to give legitimacy to their work. For this reason, they took Paul Lazarfeld's methods as model for their researches because of his international reputation and his use of statistics. Consequently, quantitative methods, in particular questionnaire research, were used more often than ethnographic ones. Further, the legitimacy of quantitative methods was strengthened through the publication of *Le métier de sociologue*⁴ in 1968, as the authors, Jean-Claude Passeron, Jean-Claude Chamboredon, and Pierre Bourdieu, defended their use. Others factors that had an impact on the diffusion of interactionist work are both the influence of Marxist theory on French sociology as well as the relatively low reputation of pragmatist philosophers such as Peirce or Dewey in France. However, there is one exception to that: the translation of Goffman's book *Asylums* published in the collection of the Editions

de Minuit directed by Pierre Bourdieu, who had a high opinion of Goffman — one of the “greatest sociologists” according to Bourdieu.⁵ Chapoulie explains part of this interest for Goffman with the attraction to the subject of asylums caused by the work of Michel Foucault.

After 1980, French sociology became more professional and research conducted in a more empiric manner. In this context, ethnographic methods received more attention and works by interactionist American sociologists were translated; for example, *Outsiders* and *Art Worlds* by Howard Becker in 1985 and 1988, *Profession of Medicine* by Eliot Freidson in 1986 or *Street Corner Society* by William F. Whyte in 1996. Despite his late introduction, Howard Becker’s work is now recognized as a reference in French sociology.

The book proposes a good overview of the French-speaking authors who are close to the interactionist approach. Chapters by Marc-Henry Soulet, Anne-Marie Arborio, Marie Buscatto, Arthur Zinn-Poget, and Isabelle Zinn summarize and discuss some of the main aspects of Becker’s work. They address topics such as methodological flexibilities, the role of concepts or the contribution of mixed methods showing in different ways Becker’s view of sociological work. For example, the discussion of the concept of *art world* by Buscatto gives a good illustration of how, in Becker’s view, concepts get richer and more specific through the outcomes of fieldwork. In his own contribution, Howard Becker gives indications for new research in sociology of art, based on his proposition of considering art as a collective action: conflict situations in the art world, creation of authenticity, life of an artwork, and its salvation or disappearance. These four points explore two main questions in his opinion: how artwork is produced and what it becomes after its completion.

More empirical chapters show how, by adopting a dynamic analysis of work interaction, interactionist sociology avoids giving a normative and static explanation of profession. This is illustrated through several studies on various subjects, such as the paradox of norms for cyclist confronted with doping (chapter by Olivier Aubel, Christophe Brissonneau, and Fabien Ohl), the definition and negotiation of roles within the profession of human resources directors (chapter by Muriel Surdez, Ivan Sainsaulieu, and Francesca Poglià Miletì) or the representation of roles in the hospital (chapter by Charles Gadea and H  l  ne Cl  au). This also allows considering artistic work like any other profession as Becker has observed. According to this view, Marc Perrenoud shows that the profession of a musician consists of different situations in which musicians are not considered as artists, but they are still part of their job. Finally, Valerie Rolle’s chapter discusses the question of reputation and its creation in the tattoo world through Becker’s *art world* concept.

The chapter by Michael Meyer deals with an interesting question that has stimulated interest in Becker: visual sociology (Becker 1995). Meyer’s experience comes from his study about the police and its observational techniques. First, he explores the use of this method. In particular, he tackles the question of negotiation to be on the field with a camera. He also proposes some concrete applications for the use

of visual sociology in research, such as showing pictures taken on the field during interviews. Second, he discusses the impact of this method on behavior. He defines three different ways of the investigated to deal with the camera. The first one being the *game*: individuals overact their role and play with the presence of the camera. The second one is the *modification*: in this case, individuals change the way they act, but the camera is not the center of their attention. Last is *ignorance*: in this last situation, individuals forget about the presence of the camera. The relevance of this reflection goes beyond visual sociology and can be applied to all observational methods.

The final chapter of the book, and in my opinion the principal contribution, is written by Pierre-Michel Menger, who was recently appointed to Collège de France. He offers an ambitious synthesis of Hughes and Becker's theories on stratification that he presents as a constructivist alternative to the functionalist and traditional theories. The question he asks is how we build in a relational approach a conception of the differences and inequalities of working conditions? He first defines *profession*, as Hughes proposed, as a set of tasks, some being valued and others being humdrum, painful, or degrading. These different tasks are hierarchized and professions struggle to obtain or to avoid their attribution. This horizontal division of labor, the tasks' distribution between professions, determines a vertical division between professions creating the social stratification. Menger (2009) then deals with the question of learning, drawing from his own book *Le Travail Créateur*. New working situations give the opportunity to learn something and to increase reputation. However, the allocation of these situations is determined by the experience already accumulated. As a consequence, therefore, there is a cumulative advantage effect that guarantees that professionals considered most competent learn more and reinforce their advantage. The third element proposed by Menger, that helps us to better understand the labor stratification, is the differentiated management of secrecy and risk depending on the profession. These elements are very relevant to the study of social stratification and deserve to be developed.

Generally speaking, *Les mondes pluriels d'Howard Becker* is a good introduction to the field of interactionist sociology and sociology of work. It goes much further than its title suggests and introduces a large part of the heritage of those known as members of the second Chicago School or the interactionist sociology: Hughes, Blumer, Freidson, Goffmann, Strauss, etc. Even if these labels were criticized by some of these authors, including Becker himself (Plummer 2003), they are used in this book without questioning. Furthermore, the book gives a good overview of the French-speaking authors who have a similar approach. It proposes a rich and varied introduction to different research fields. However, the book's richness can also be seen as its weakness. The central thread of the book is not always clear and it is difficult to find links between all the contributions that were not all written for the initial conference. I find particularly interesting the methodological proposition and questions asked about visual sociology by Michael Meyer and Pierre-Michel Menger's attempt to enlarge the theory of stratification.

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NOTES

1. In English: The interactionist heritage in sociology of work.
2. Jean-Michel Chapoulie is, with Marc-Henry Soulet, the French translator of the *Grounded Theory*, who also wrote a chapter of this book, one of the investigators and translators of the interactionist sociology in France in particular of Hughes' work.
3. Centre National de la Recherche.
4. In English: the sociologist's work. See two texts by Bourdieu on Goffman after his death in French newspapers *Libération* (http://www.leseditionsdeminuit.eu/f/index.php?sp=livAut&auteur_id=1548) and *Le Monde* (<http://www.homme-moderne.org/societe/socio/bourdieu/varia/mortEGoffman.html>).
5. In English: the creative work.

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