Book Review/Compte rendu

Howard S. Becker, *Telling About Society*. Chicago Guides to Writing, Editing, and Publishing. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007, 304 pp. $US 15.00 paper (978-0-226-04126-1), $US 37.50 hardcover (978-0-226-04125-4)

Telling About Society is the third of Howard Becker's "writing guides" for social scientists, following *Writing for Social Scientists (*1986) and *Tricks of the Trade* (1998). This collection provides practical advice about the craft of social inquiry with particular attention placed upon improving our understanding of the writing process. The range of artistic and sociological cases Becker considers and his ability to articulate complex unspoken practices in plain English make *Telling About Society* an unorthodox book about writing and methods.

Becker's main point is that every way of telling a story is perfect in its own fashion, for its own particular purpose; he is "convinced that there is no best way to tell a story" (p. 285). *Telling About Society* encourages the reader to consider many of the methods artists and social scientists use to present knowledge, including statistical tables, photographs, films, charts, novels, plays, and Weberian ideal types. Becker walks the reader through these forms, discussing their respective strengths and limitations, focusing mainly upon the promises of each. This book is an appreciation of the little steps, sensibilities, conscious and unconscious decisions involved in building representations about society.

Telling About Society is separated into two parts, "Ideas" and "Examples," each comprised of eight chapters. The early chapters map out much of the work involved in telling about society; in so doing, Becker makes visible the moral issues involved with building representations and the way both "users" and "makers" evaluate those representations. The book's later chapters offer analyses of specific works (e.g., Erving Goffman, Umberto Eco, Italo Calvino) and include an inclusive array of particular methods (e.g., charts, visual sociology, drama).

Early in the book, Becker describes the steps involved in crafting any type of representation (i.e., selection, translation, arrangement, and interpretation). It always involves common choices and constraints, as we are informed by conventions and the agreed-upon standards by which we expect our work to be judged. Representations of society are "organizational products" shaped, crafted, and judged within the overlapping

worlds of makers and users of these representations — an organizational perspective consistent with his earlier work in *Art Worlds* (1982). Every type of representation is good for conveying some things and eliding other things; it is up to us to consider which one works best for our purposes.

The division of labour between makers and users varies widely between different types of representation. Becker illustrates this point in the chapter "Who Does What?" by comparing the presentation of statistical data in tabular form and the arrangement of documentary photographs on the page. Makers of statistical tables do a lot of interpretive work by naming rows and columns, and in the process they tell users which variables to focus on. For the users of a book of documentary photographs, however, the orienting axes are more implicit; once a photographer has selected the order of photographs (a process Becker details with complexity) it is up to the users to do most of the interpretive work. Becker walks us through some visual analysis of *American Photographs* by Walker Evans and illustrates the rich, if not endless array of comparisons the reader may make between a few photographs. A later chapter on Italo Calvino returns to this point, noting how literature, like photographs, provides more interpretive possibilities for the user of representations: "The social scientist's unambiguous concepts produce unambiguous results. The literary description trades clarity and unidimensionality for the ability to make multiple analyses of the multiple possibilities contained in one story" (p. 284). Becker does not claim that one form of telling is superior to the other, but he suggests that sociologists would provide a richer analysis of the social world by considering and incorporating other methods.

Drawing from the work of Bruno Latour and Thomas Kuhn, Becker describes makers and users as "interpretive communities." Through this analysis, Becker ultimately provides a matter-of-fact critique of disciplinary blinders: most members of a representational world may agree, by convention, on questions deemed "important" and how to present knowledge, but this consensus is limiting. Professional socialization into a world of telling includes learning the politics of fear and conformity; as he later states, to question a representational world's standards and conventions is to attack its status system. Without being overtly antagonistic, Becker picks up on this point again as he concludes the book, offering a humble plea for social scientists to consider less conventional ways of presenting knowledge. Becker knows he is fighting an uphill battle, but helps his case by demonstrating the representative power of various forms of telling.

In an examination of Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* as a work of social analysis, Becker states, "her book doesn't present and demonstrate a single hypothesis but rather a complex web of connected observations" (p. 242). *Telling About Society* can be described in a similar way. His insights are thoughtful and measured, though they may occasionally seem idiosyncratic. Many of his ideas and examples appeared in earlier essays published since the mid-1980s; the chapters only occasionally refer to each other and often read like discrete essays. Becker considers this potential weakness as a virtue, suggesting that the various chapters of the book be read in any order one wishes, intending the book as a "whole to look more like a network of thoughts and examples than a linear argument" (p. xv). Although it may appear as a loose and disparate collection of insights, *Telling About Society* presents a deeply worthwhile and generous series of observations collected over more than 20 years.

This book would surely spur important discussions in Introduction to Sociology, methods, and advanced graduate courses alike. *Telling About Society* maps and gently questions the boundaries of the sociological discipline. Becker should be applauded for bravely attacking (but with subtlety and respect) the standards and conventions of the field, and thus its status system. *Telling About Society* raises important questions about the limits of sociological representations and should help us make sense of and improve how we practice our craft.

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