Howard S. Becker, *What about Mozart? What about Murder? Reasoning from Cases* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2014).

Theorizing depends on our ability to move beyond our case. Whether engaged in formal-looking abstractions or in richer processual accounts, we must assume that something about the way we narrated our case can shed light on something else in the world. Usually, when we care to think about theory in that sense, we assume that there is a kind of Heisenberg principle at work. We can either dive deeply into the complexities of one case (giving us a thick description and an analysis of one corner of the social world), *or* use it as a jumping board for comparison by elegantly shaving off its complexities. The tradeoff seems obvious. This way of thinking is also, if we follow Howard Becker's new book, dead wrong.

What about Mozart? What about Murder (henceforth, WAM/WAM) thus revolves around its subtitle: *Reasoning from cases*. Mostly speaking to qualitative researchers, the book centers on the importance and challenges of moving among different phenomena and sites. Running through the chapters, the central problem is how to deal with the social world with all of its complexity and abundance while thinking in a comparative vein.

In a style that Becker-readers have learnt to expect, WAM/WAM can be read on two levels. On one level, it is a highly theoretical examination of the way in which sociological method and theorizing are intimately related. Becker touches on the relationship between analogy and typology (chapter 3), the comparative dimensions that emerge by tracing the constitutive processes through which social phenomena emerge (chapters 4 and 5), the use of hypothetical cases (chapter 6) and the difference between the use of hypothetical cases in sociology and philosophy (chapter 8).

Except, of course, that it doesn't read like a "theory book." One of the most effortless writers in sociology, Becker manages to turn the theoretical question he tackles into something that resembles a literary quest, a rich and often funny set of observations and examples: some of them reverse engineering his "greatest hits," others detailing what Becker obviously considers to be exemplars of sociological work, still others narrating luminous episodes from his life. Readers will find

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themselves swept away by a string of anecdotes or a re-telling of a sociological gem, only to be reminded, pages later, that they were led to a theoretical conclusion.

The first chapters of the book set the stage for Becker's more original claims. As Becker reminds us, the social phenomena we study are always overdetermined. To understand anything about the social world we need to burrow deep into its complexities. But, then again, even to understand the particular, not to mention getting a grasp on a more generalizable picture, we need to constantly think comparatively. To begin with, we need to think comparatively to get the juices flowing. Thus, as Becker tells the tale, knowing about the Brazilian fixer (*despachante*) or about how small and centralized French academia really is allows us to think about the world closer to us in more interesting ways. We can see how lay experts fulfill a role that is very similar to that of the *despachante*; we can gain new insights about the American academic system so many of us take for granted. Or, to put things more systematically—as Becker develops in chapter 2 with the aid of Everett Hughes' research on labor and ethnic relations, and in chapter 3 with Elliot Friedson's research on systems of referral—thinking comparatively is how both local research and general theory is built.

This, then, leads Becker to the relationship between depth and abstraction. If we are to think about multiple cases and compare them to each other, we necessarily need to shave off parts of the world. But when and how do we do so? Using his by-now-classical study of marijuana smokers in chapter 4, he argues that keeping the world simple does not help our case's extension, but actually hinders it. It is precisely by opening the "black box" and showing the complex processes that make the phenomenon we are interested in tick that we can open up comparative possibilities. By constantly asking "what more is going on?" we are led to find the web of mechanisms that make the case what it is. It is only from the point of view of complexity that we can move to abstraction, as the most interesting theoretical possibilities often lie in the comparison of processual similarities and differences. If the end point of the marijuana paper seems simple (you have to learn to smoke it, learn to identify the physical effects as the effects of marijuana, and then learn to enjoy it) it only came after delving extremely deep into things that seemed at first to be tangential to the case.

This is not to say that we can only move among cases at the end of our analysis, when we have already mined all the complexities of our

fieldsite. As Becker makes clear, a comparative sensibility should work its way into the entirety of the research process. It is crucial as a way to begin, but thinking comparatively also iteratively changes the set of comparisons we make as we learn more about the case (changes that, in turn, suggest other questions). Moving from marijuana to art worlds in chapter 5, Becker thus show how thinking about multiple cases shaped his own theory of valuation in art, and built up to his theory of art worlds as socially constructed by multiple actors—some of whom we then recognize as "artists" and others we studiously ignore.

The importance of comparative cases, real or imagined, leads to another important argument that the book makes by way of wrapping up (in chapter 8). Here, Becker opens a surprising front that sociologists usually ignore—that with philosophy. Much of current philosophy uses imaginary examples to make a point. Thus, to take an example recently mined by Gabriel Abend, meta-ethicists often think about morality through the lenses of fabricated cases such as "the trolley problem": would you change the tracks a trolley is running on so it hits only one person, or do nothing and let the trolley hit three? But if sociology may also use hypothetical cases (or cases we know so little about that they might as well have been), it does so very differently. For philosophers, the hypothetical example is the thing itself. The fact that we don't often make trolley-like decisions, that, indeed, the modality and temporality of this form of decision-making is all too rare, becomes irrelevant for the construction of the argument. For sociologists, however, hypothetical cases act more heuristically. It is an important way to get gain theoretical insights, and to open up questions we would have missed in our field. But the center of gravity is always the field along with its complexities. Again, the crucial place of a deep engagement with a specific case in the act of theorizing is made apparent.

Even beyond its substantive arguments, as I noted above, the book also works because good writing is so refreshing. Sociologists are not exactly known for the quality of their prose. In chapter 7 about "when to stop," for instance, Becker moves from disasters to natural disasters in terms of what is "enough" preparation—how much should we prepare for highly unlikely problems in a space launch? How much money and time should municipalities put into preparing for highly unusual seismic activities? He then moves from disasters to collections (When do we stop collecting? When is a collection just good enough?), in a move so elegant that all the reader can do is nod in silent

admiration. And then, using these examples as a jump off point, he pivots to make the pragmatist case about the social determination of "when enough is enough," which is a good thing for sociologists to remember. If what we are supposed to get from the book is an appreciation of the theoretical clues that comparisons provide, then Becker is obviously leading by example.

But Becker's style of theorizing on the sly also presents its challenges. WAM/WAM often glides over difficult questions and possible objections. Thus, for one, I wanted to know a little more about why Becker believes that comparisons seem to work so well. Why is it that "whatever *it* is, in one place, you'll find some version of it in other places like it too" [19]? Is this really always the case? Is it necessary, or does it just "happen" to work that way? Doesn't Becker smuggle in the assumption that other places are "like" the one we know, thus assuming what we need to show? I have my suspicions about the underlying theoretical position he takes, but Becker never tells.

Similarly, at certain points I would have liked to stop and argue with what Becker writes. For example, in a book with a title as alluring as WAM/WAM something must be said about Mozart and murder. In the concluding chapter, Becker sketches questions he often faced when he presented his art worlds perspective and his labeling theory of deviance. In both cases, his detractors used an extreme case in order to problematize the strong constructionist account of evaluation and deviance—okay, deviance is constructed, but what about murder? Fine, artistic valuation is social, but wasn't Mozart a genius? For Becker, the same problem applies to the philosophical use of thin examples: if you only knew more about Mozart and murder rather than using them abstractly, Becker argues, you could see that the critique is empty. Killing is often a crime, but is often considered an act of heroism; our appreciation of Mozart is socially located in the extreme—someone growing up in a different time, with a different musical tradition, would not share our appreciation.

But is Becker not flattening the argument? Are there no proclivities and capacities that sociologists need to be aware of? Is it really turtles all the way down? Of course, the whole tonal structure of Western music needs to be in place for Mozart to be considered great. But once a certain musical structure is set in place, can the greatness of Mozart be completely explained away by social processes? And so with murder. Yes, of course, people have been killing each other in more or less justified ways forever. But it also seems that there needs to be quite a lot of social scaffolding and ritual involved for people to kill

(especially certain categories of people, such as children; and especially when the killing occurs in a face to face setting). A sociological analysis, in other words, does not preclude the taking into account of certain tendencies and capacities. Perhaps it may even open up new questions that a strong constructionist position would ignore.

But finally, these questions do not detract from the force of the book. Despite winning the title, Mozart is tangential to the book's argument; condemning a book for being too well written is a little sad. Becker's insights about comparison and sociological insight are important and original, hopefully laying to rest some popular myths and misconceptions about doing research and theorizing it.

It is always tricky to ascribe one's writing to one's lineage, especially a thinker as prolific and influential as Becker. Still, Becker's mode of thinking about the social world, as he himself notes, is very much a product of his engagement with Everett C. Hughes and Herbert Blumer. After a series of Blumer-inspired books about improvisation and the interactionally emergent production of thought with Robert Faulkner, WAM/WAM is a swing of the pendulum back to Hughes. This is the Simmelian Becker, constantly looking for permutations of social life, for both form and content. It is a book that zeroes in on the recurring social forms that emerge as actors pragmatically puzzle out their world. And it is his theoretical voice at its best.

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