

HOWARD BECKER PAYS A VISIT TO OUR CLASS

Howard Becker visita nossa aula

Howard Becker hace una visita a nuestra clase

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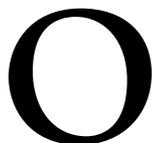
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APRESENTAÇÃO



On November 10, 2020, I invited American sociologist Howard Becker to visit one of the classes in the undergraduate program that Sílvia Monnerat and I lectured at the School of Social Sciences FGV CPDOC on the work of Gilberto Velho (1945-2012). Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the entire program was offered online.

The two met in January 1976, when, at Becker's invitation, Gilberto spent a few weeks at Northwestern University, in Evanston, a city located about 20 km north of Chicago. That same year, Gilberto reciprocated, and Becker spent two months as a visiting professor at the PPGAS/Museu Nacional (UFRJ). In 1990, Becker returned to Brazil for another short stay. They became close friends and maintained intense academic contact until Gilberto's death.

Howie, as he prefers to be called, spent an hour talking to the students. He spoke about his memories of Gilberto and his visits to Brazil, but also about his training as sociologist in Chicago and the sociological perspective. We recorded the visit, transcribed it and, with Howie's permission, we now publish the text, with minor adjustments. Since it was an informal conversation and not a lecture, we decided to preserve this characteristic in the publication.

As we didn't know if Howie could accept the invitation, we decided not to give the students an advance notice. The famous 92-year-old sociologist, always present in our students' bibliography, materialized as someone very friendly and accessible. Our students were delighted with the meeting and decided to nominate him the patron of the 2020 graduate class of CPDOC. I believe that the reading of the text will clarify the causes of this enchantment.

Howard Becker: Gilberto came to Chicago. And, of course, he came during Brazil's summer vacation, which was January. In Chicago, January is really terrible. He got off the airplane, and there was snow everywhere, and it was freezing. He told me that he almost got back on the plane and was going to go right back. But he decided to stay. So, he was complaining all the time about the weather...

Celso Castro: We got to know your work through Gilberto, who brought your sociological work to Brazil back in the early 70s. He also published here, in Portuguese, part of your work. And he was always, above all, a friend of yours. He always spoke of you with a lot of intellectual admiration, but also with a lot of affection.

Howard Becker: Yes, he was... I mean, I don't have to tell you that Gilberto could be difficult, but he was a great person.

Celso Castro: More than once, we heard Gilberto tracing his intellectual genealogy, starting with Georg Simmel, and passing through Robert Park, Everett Hughes, and Howard Becker to himself. What do you think these gentlemen have in common in relation to the style of work or the vision of society they have, for this genealogy to make sense for Gilberto?

Howard Becker: It was a real tradition. People should really read Robert Park. He was a wonderful analyst of society. He worked as a newspaper man for many years, for big newspapers. And he was also a ghostwriter for Booker T. Washington, who was a famous black American thinker. But he never wrote his books, he told Park what to put in it, and Park wrote it. So, Park was a professional writer.

And then, when he was 50 years old, he met W.I. Thomas who was a professor at the University of Chicago. And Thomas thought: "Aha! I'll get him before other people know." So, he hired him. And Park was at the University of Chicago for 25 years. He taught generations of American sociologists and people from other countries as well.

My teacher, Everett Hughes, was a student of Robert Park. So, it's a real genealogy, not just: "Oh, I heard about him, and I decided to belong to his tradition." No, I mean, it was... I felt like it was passed on. Like they lay their hands on you and they say: "OK, it's yours now." It was a wonderful, real tradition.

And, for example, I trace all the work that I did about Work, about Occupations, to a remark that Park made in his famous essay on the city as a laboratory for studying social interaction. He said: "In the big city, every kind of work takes on the characteristics of a profession." That is to say, there are colleague groups, and they have informal understandings about how their work should be done and who the other people are that they have to work with, and all of those things.

So, if you study doctors, you learn certain things, but, if you do like I did and you study people who play the piano in taverns and bars, and play for dancing and so forth, you'll find the same sorts of things. It'll look different, but underneath there are the same loyalties and informal understandings about how "we" should do this and what to think about those people that "we" do it for. Because there's a lot of similarity between the way musicians talked about the people in the bars who listened to their music and the way doctors talk when the rest of us aren't listening.

Celso Castro: OK. So, I'll ask the students if they want to make questions. Well, Ana Beatriz raised her hand.

Howard Becker: Oh, good thing!

Celso Castro: She organized Gilberto's papers which were donated to FGV, so she has a very good understanding of his life.

Anna Beatriz Oliveira: First of all, I'm a huge fan. It's such an honor to meet you! I was the intern that worked on Gilberto Velho's personal archive. Professor Silvia supervised me. And he kept about four briefcases full of letters he exchanged with you. Mostly letters. To me, it's one of the best parts of the archive. And, when I started reading it, I found out that a lot of letters came with a bunch of stamps on it, of the "*Venerável Ordem das Capivaras*", and I couldn't understand why.

Howard Becker: Yes, the "*Ordem das Capivaras*"!

Anna Beatriz Oliveira: Yes, and I found an article that you wrote after Gilberto's passing, and you talked about the "*Venerável Ordem das Capivaras*". And then I realized why there were so many stamps of *capivaras* on your letters. So, I wanted to ask you if you can tell us a little bit more about that story, because I didn't know that Gilberto Velho and you had a secret society!

Howard Becker: Well, when we came to Rio de Janeiro for two months, my first wife, who died so many years ago... Before we came to Rio, we went to the *jardim zoológico* [zoo] in Chicago, because I had read that there was an animal in Brazil called "*capivara*". And I asked Gilberto if he thought we would be able to see a *capivara* while we were in Brazil. And, of course, if he was a reasonable person, he would have said: "No, you can't see *capivaras* in Rio de Janeiro. It's ridiculous!" But he said: "Well, yes, probably you can. We have to look." And so, while I was there, he asked everybody: "Did you see any *capivaras* today?" And everybody looked puzzled and wondered: "What is he talking about?". I mean, we knew that he liked jokes like that. And then he decided to organize the "*Venerável Ordem dos Amigos da Capivara*". When I got back in Chicago, I thought: "We have to have something to show it, you know." So, I went to a place where they make these *carimbos* and I had two or three made. You didn't get one, Celso?

Celso Castro: No, I didn't...

Howard Becker: Well, you were too young, I think.

Celso Castro: Yes. But he was always stamping the letters with the *capivara*.

Howard Becker: I know. And especially official papers.

Celso Castro: Who else wants to ask anything to Howie?

Silvia Monnerat: Hi, it's a big honor to have you here! My English is so bad, but I want to hear about the relationship you had with Goffman by the time you came to Brazil.

Howard Becker: Well, Goffman was an old friend of mine from Graduate School. You know, we had the same teachers. We were in the sociology department in Chicago during the same years. And most of the people in our cohort — people that went to school with us —

thought of him as the most brilliant person in the world. Actually, he was very difficult. He was smart, but he was also very difficult and hard to get along with.

But I had something that he didn't have. The thing that distinguished me from most of the graduate students was that I had, from a very early age, maybe like fifteen... I was working in nightclubs, playing the piano till very late at night, playing in bars where striptease dancing was done, where the dancers took off their clothes and danced. And it was, you know, unusual for a young person — a young kid like me — to be in that world. But it was during World War II, and all the people who were 18 years old were in the war fighting, so they needed somebody to play for those girls to dance, and I was one of the people that did that.

And Goffman envied that because he knew he didn't have that kind of experience of life, and I did, because I needed a job and I could do that — you know, it came to me naturally. And I did that for many years.

And all the people in my student group, that I went to Graduate School with... Many of them were older and had had a lot of life experience: they'd been in the army, or they'd worked with trade. But now they were students, and I was the only one who was "in the world", in the world that we studied, not the world of people who make studies.

So, I remember I was playing at a place several miles from the University of Chicago, and, one night, they organized an expedition. You know, you would think they were going to the jungle. They were going so far away, to that strange place, and they didn't know anyone. And they came and said... You know, they were so ill at ease. It was terrible to watch! And Erving was one of those.

So, he admired me. He didn't want to admire me, but he did because he couldn't live that life. He knew that I knew things he didn't know, and he knew that, if I were him, I would be making everybody feel bad because they didn't know those things. But, you know, I wasn't like that.

And, when Erving came to Rio de Janeiro, he and Gilberto met. It was the funniest meeting you could ever imagine because Erving had found Gilberto's apartment, by the *praia*, *Posto Seis*, that's where he lived. So, Erving came in and the first thing he said to Gilberto was: "I noticed, when I was walking on the street, that people do funny things with their hands here." I had no idea what he was talking about, and, of course, Gilberto didn't too. And he had noticed... Who knows what he had noticed! So, immediately, Gilberto decided to make fun of him, you know, to tease him, and was making things up to tell him. But Erving didn't know what to make of Gilberto and that way of life... Do they know about Deja?

Celso Castro: Yes, Deja was the...

Howard Becker: The *empregada* (maid).

Celso Castro: The *empregada* of Gilberto. One of Gilberto's last works was about the *empregadas domésticas* (domestic maids) in Brazil (Velho, 2012).

Howard Becker: Oh, really? I've never seen that.

Celso Castro: We can send it to you. It's in Portuguese.

Howard Becker: I'll read it.

Celso Castro: Deja was a very important person in Gilberto's domestic life.

Howard Becker: He couldn't have gotten through one day without Deja.

Celso Castro: Howie, there's a question I would love to ask Gilberto, but, unfortunately, I can't do that anymore. But perhaps you can answer it. How do you see this change that we are experiencing due to the pandemic, working from home, and social distancing? From the point of view of a sociologist, what impact do you believe it has on our lives now and for the future?

Howard Becker: Well, Celso, I'm going to tell you: one of the things I try not to do as a sociologist is answer those big questions like that, like: "What is the effect of the weather on society?" I don't know! I mean, somebody would have to do the hard work of collecting descriptions of what people are doing. I wrote a small piece that was published in France. Do you know a publication called AOC [Analyse Opinion Critique], with Sylvain Bourmeau? It's a description of how my neighborhood here in San Francisco adapted in the beginning of the pandemic. Especially the restaurants. Because, you know, it's a real neighborhood, and people in their local restaurants... People are very friendly with the owners and the cooks and so forth. And all of a sudden, you can't go there. So, then, they can't make any money, and how are the people who ate there going to eat? And how are the cooks and the owners of the restaurants going to live?

So I was able to watch, as people say, in real-time, how a system of restaurants, were changing the way they did their business, from having a restaurant where you walked in and sat down, ordered, and somebody brought you the food, to a business where you called somebody or used the email and sent them an order saying "we want two dinners like this and two dinners like that", and then, an hour later, somebody rings your bell and brings a sack, and you pay them. It's a different way of organizing that kind of life. On both sides!

So, we could watch that. And that's ideal. If you wanted to do an experiment, that's how you would do it. So, you could imagine that somebody is doing an experiment with us and giving us this problem to solve collectively. Because that's what sociology is about. How do people deal with what happens in their everyday life? How did they solve problems like eating? "What am I going to eat?" "Who's going to cook it?" "Do I have to cook it?" "If I do, where will I get the ingredients I need?" You know, things like that are mostly taken care

of by conventional standard ways that everybody knows. And it's all there. But, in a situation like this, everything has to be invented. So, it's an unusual experience to have to figure out a new way to get yourself food so that you can eat. And, I mean, we've all had that experience.

How many of you kept notes about how you adapted to the problem?

Celso Castro: We've been discussing a lot about that in our classes.

Howard Becker: Let's see hands. How many of you did that? Ok, that's the biggest lesson I could give you: when things happen, write it down. Because that's what you work with. You know, you write everything down because you'll immediately have ideas, you'll say: "Oh, I understand. It's like this." Well, it's probably not exactly like that. It may not be very much like that at all. It might be completely different. So, when you write things down, don't edit, don't write down only the interesting things. Write everything down. And then you'll begin to see the things that you don't even notice because they're so commonplace — it's what everybody knows. And that's become my working definition of the great word that Anthropology and Sociology share, which is "Culture". Culture is what everybody knows.

And, for instance, I'm a visiting speaker. So, you're very respectful and you let me talk and talk and talk until I stop. If I talked for twenty minutes, nobody would interrupt me, probably, because that's not the way we do it. And the way we do it and what everybody knows — expressions like that — are what Sociology and Anthropology are about.

Celso Castro: Beatriz raised her hand. Can you answer one more question, Howie?

Howard Becker: Sure.

Beatriz Klimeck: Well, first, of course, it's an honor. I can't even describe how it's like to be here. This is in the name of all of us. I want to talk a little about your website. It's very well-humored, as it usually is in your writing, and I was curious about something I read there when I was a student. When I first found out your email address was available for everyone, I thought I should write you something, because it was an opportunity I could not miss. But then I realized... I read what you wrote about it, and I realized I could probably find out what I wanted to hear from your writings. So, I never wrote you anything, and I think it was for the best. But, if possible, I would like to hear a little bit about the students' emails you receive and this exchange that you have with having a website where you publish the things that you want people to know about, regarding music and everything.

Howard Becker: Well, I don't get as much email as I would like because of that website. The funniest ones I used to get often came very late at night. I would get telephone calls, mostly from young women, who were students. In their voice, I could hear that they were desperate. They didn't know what to do and something terrible was about to happen to them.

And it was usually: "I have a paper that I must turn into the teacher tomorrow. I don't know what to say. Can you tell me?"

So, I had to, first, tell them: "No, I can't write your paper for you. Not now, that's not what the teacher wants to know. They don't want to know what I told you. They want to know what you found out by putting together a lot of small fragments that you picked up from different things that I wrote, that you read etc." That was not the answer that they wanted because the paper had to be given to the teacher the next day. So...

There's a little note on the website — you probably saw it — addressed to the students, which essentially says: "Don't do that. Read everything and then, what you don't understand... Then we can talk about that. If what I said wasn't clear, then that's an opportunity for me to learn from you how to say it better. But I don't want to find out that I can write a paper that your teacher will like. I'm not interested in your teacher evaluating my paper that way. The kind of evaluation that we get as scholars is that somebody reads what you write, they think about it, and they take it seriously and they try to use it. When they have a problem, when they don't understand something, and then they want to see if I could help them, then I'm glad to help, because I know that I'm not always very clear. Very often it's easier to say what I meant because what I wrote was an answer to some question that arose in a specific situation. And now you want to apply it to another situation, and I can help you, but I can't answer for you because you know the other situation better than I do." And so that's why I wrote that.

And, on the other hand, I love that people look at the website and then sometimes write me and say: "You know, you said this here, but I don't know, my experience is that it doesn't work like that, it doesn't work the way you described things. What do you do when that happens?" And this is very interesting because I've had experience traveling and talking about my work in different countries.

Well, this is what happened to me once. I was in England, and I was giving lectures. I spent six weeks at a university. And then, before I went back to the United States, I did what musicians called "one-nighters", where you appear in, you know, one appearance somewhere. So, England is very small. It's not like the United States or Brazil, where you spend all day to go from one city to the next. So, for six days, I did what musicians called "one-nighters" — performed for a day in each of the five cities, at a different university. And, in every one of the five universities, the same thing happened.

And, by that time, I thought I'd learned a lot about British universities, just from this experience. What happened was: whatever subject I spoke about, somebody would then raise their hand and say, in a very scared, frightened voice: "Well, Professor Becker, in an article

published five years ago, you said..." — then they would read something that I wrote — "... but today you said this..." — and they would read from their notes from what I had just said that day and say: "There seems to be a contradiction. Both these things can't be true. How do you explain that?" And they had this air of: "Aha, I caught him! I win!"

So, I said: "Well, I guess I learned something in-between. I got more data and found out different things." So, nothing I say is, you know, the truth that came down from the mountain. It's just today's news, and tomorrow I may find other facts and have to think again. That's what science is. And the look on these persons' faces was like: "What?! What is he talking about?" Because their conception of what professors do is: they find the truth, they announce it and then they defend it for the rest of their lives, instead of saying: "Oh, I guess I was wrong." "No, you can't be wrong. You're a professor." It's so funny! And it was so British. In other places, people would argue with me in different ways.

In France, for quite a long time — not so much now —, people would say: "you said this, but Pierre Bourdieu said that. How can that be?" Because they thought Pierre Bourdieu had a special connection to God or something, who would tell him the truth so that he could pass it on, instead of being engaged in a collective endeavor. And he was a little bit like that. He acted that way.

But one of the things that Brazil and the United States have in common, that the European countries don't have, is how big they are. You know, it's such a long distance from Rio to São Paulo, or from São Paulo to Natal... You know, you don't just go there, hop on a train and, two hours later, three hours later, you're there.

And so, American universities, which is where most of this stuff happens, are much more isolated from one another, even with email, telephones, and everything. They are much more, in a way, provincial. They're different. So, the University of Chicago, when I was a graduate student, was a very different place from Columbia University in New York. Because that was overnight, you know. You would leave today and tomorrow you'd be in New York. And that means that there's much less casual communication of the kind that you meet somebody in the hall or on the street, when you talk to each other, and you exchange ideas. I mean, you can walk down the street in Paris, and you have a pretty good chance of meeting some well-known sociologist, if you know what they look like. You can see them. You can see them walk down the street and, you know, say: "Oh, there is Celso! Aha! Hi, Celso." But that didn't happen.

So, when I was a student, I was in Chicago, Everett Hughes was in Chicago and W. Lloyd Warner, the anthropologist, was in Chicago. All the people that were supposed to constitute the Chicago School were there. And then there was Columbia, which was an over-

night train trip, where Paul Lazarsfeld, Robert K. Merton and people like that were. And they were different. They had different ideas and they communicated among themselves. And it was really a quite different way of thinking because they didn't have to think about a lot of things because everybody they talked to thought the same way they did.

And, I don't know, I think Brazil might be a little like that situation. I don't know any more what it's like, but, you know, between São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro, there was a real difference in culture.

Celso Castro: Yes, I agree with you.

Howard Becker: You know, when Gilberto got his degree in São Paulo, it was a different world than Rio, because, in São Paulo, they had the French, who came during World War II. The French came and went to São Paulo, I don't know why.

Celso Castro: Before the World War. Lévi-Strauss was in São Paulo since 1934.

Howard Becker: Right. That's right, Lévi-Strauss was there.

Celso Castro: Radcliffe-Brown was there as well. Radcliffe-Brown was there for one or two years.

Howard Becker: One of my teachers, Herbert Blumer, the social psychologist, spent a year in Brazil. He never wrote anything about it, never published anything about it. He mentioned it occasionally. And he was a guy who... Although everything he wrote was very abstract, he was a student of Park. He went out in the world and met people. You know, found out for himself what was happening, went looking. But he never wrote about it.

One of the things that I learned from Hughes was: when you learn something, your job is not done until you tell the other people in your business what you learned. Your work is to tell everybody else what you just learned. Which I thought was a wonderful way to think of doing science. It's much more down to earth. You know, more practical than all the definitions of science we learn in philosophy of science.

Celso Castro: And to tell other people in a clear way, so that they can understand, right?

Howard Becker: Well, that's a big help. If people can understand what you say, that's very helpful. Well, as you know, I'm a great proponent of writing and speaking in a way that's understandable.

Celso Castro: Yes. It reminds me of the book by Wright Mills (1959), *The sociological imagination*. He was translating three pages of Parsons in just one paragraph, in plain English.

Howard Becker: Yeah, it's really terrible. You can almost always reduce it — you know, all that talk — to something simple and clear. You have to spend half a year translating it into your language.

Celso Castro: So, could you take another question from Anna Beatriz?

Howard Becker: Yes, certainly.

Anna Beatriz Oliveira: I want to ask you about your experience here, teaching at Museu Nacional, because we read a few articles that Gilberto Velho wrote about you and Goffman, and, in one of them, he mentions your time here. So, I'd like to know how your experience was: the courses that you taught here or what did you think about the students.

Howard Becker: Well, I had a wonderful time, which means that the students were interesting to me. They were interesting because one thing Gilberto certainly did was push them out to do fieldwork: "You have to go out, go somewhere, watch people and write down what you saw and what you heard." Like that. I was only here a couple of months, so we had one class, and there were eight or ten people. I think a lot of theses and dissertations came out from those classes. Somebody did a dissertation on "Escola de Samba". But Gilberto was always interested in every different aspect of social life, from the Funk Music — it was the theme of Hermano's [Vianna] research — to astrology, the use of drugs and everything, you know.

Celso Castro: I think that the work of Gilberto lives pretty much on in his students' works, not only in his published works, but also through his network of students and people who were affected by him.

Howard Becker: That's the most wonderful thing you can say about any teacher: when you can say that the students continued that tradition, added to it, and changed it. Then it's still alive...

Celso Castro: And there was a lot of affection — not only intellectual, because Gilberto was not the head of a school, he wasn't the big boss of a team of researchers, like so many other sociologists everywhere. No, he was very generous with young people, with his students. And that's a very important — I think — aspect of his life as an intellectual and as a professor. We had lots of testimonies, in this course, of former students saying exactly the same thing.

Howard Becker: It's the most wonderful thing you could say about any teacher. When you people start teaching, remember that. It's your students who are the real fruit of your work.

So, what's the big news in Brazilian Sociology and Anthropology now? What's the big news? What's currently of great interest to all the sociologists?

Celso Castro: I think that the greatest interest now is the big question of the transformation of Brazilian society over the last years. You know, we have a very conservative wave in politics and religion, that is linked to the election of a far-right president, Bolsonaro, and this transformation of Brazilian society is intriguing most of the sociologists and political analysts:

what happened that caused this shift in society, which was not so conservative? At least, it didn't look so conservative before. I think that, in the United States, it's different because you always had people from the right and conservatives speaking out loud. In Brazil, we didn't have that. It was much quieter. And, nowadays, the situation is much more polarized in Brazil. And, especially for the social scientists, who were living in a kind of progressive bubble, that was a shock of reality. We still need to understand it fully.

Howard Becker: Well, you know, my prejudice about social scientists is that they always want to say something big: "the society is this..." And, very often, as you know, when you look around, every day, there's specific studies of very specific things. Like, if I said to you: "What's different about people who play chess in Brazil now from before Bolsonaro? Is that something that changed?" Because a lot of people do that, right? What about cooking? Has Brazilian cuisine changed a lot?

Because, you know, living with Gilberto was an eye-opener for me because I could not imagine having somebody like Deja in the house, seven days a week, taking care of everything that I needed. I don't know how rich I'd have to be to afford that. And, many things, I had to do for myself. So, I think, these days, any man who didn't know how to feed himself could go hungry a lot of the time because nobody... It's not something that comes when you pay your rent: somebody comes along who feeds you and cleans the house — all the stuff that Deja did.

I mean, it used to be like that at some point, but a long time before I came on the scene. So, day to day life is something that is always the touch-and-go to me. Because I came to Brazil in 76, and I said: "I'm going to a dictatorship. What is it going to be like living in a dictatorship? Well, I don't know." I went to the beach every Sunday like everybody else, in Leblon. And Gilberto would say: "Ok, now we are going to *Posto Seis*." I remember vividly seeing some poetry painted on a fence, a wooden fence. And it was, apparently, a love poem about some guy who was missing his girlfriend or some woman who was missing her boyfriend. And everybody looked at me and said: "No, no, no! This is political." Do you remember a song called "*Apesar de você*"?

Celso Castro: Yes, "*Apesar de você*", by Chico Buarque de Holanda. *Apesar de você, amanhã há de ser outro dia*: "In spite of you, tomorrow is going to be another day".

Howard Becker: Yeah. Right. So, I said: "Isn't that a sweet kind of love song? Because it's 'in spite of YOU', the woman that he is addressing: 'In spite of you, I'm still happy.'" People looked at me and said: "Don't be ridiculous! That's not what that's about. That's about the government. It was a protest song! Only it fooled me. When I came back to the United States,

people wanted to know: “What is it like in a dictatorship?” I said: “You wouldn’t notice. You would have to learn how to interpret the signs painted on fences.”

One of my vivid memories is: there were rumors of a new record of Chico Buarque. A new *disco* was coming. But it hadn’t arrived. Nobody knew if it would be allowed. Would the *Censura* [censorship] allow it to happen? And so, one day, I was at some neighborhood that I didn’t usually go to, and I went into a record store, and there was the record. So, I bought a copy. I came back to Gilberto’s office with my prize, this wonderful record. Everybody said: “Where did you get that? We should go there right now.” I said: “No, they had a lot of them.” They said: “Well, it might not be there. Police might come and get it, etc.” It was such a different experience! So, the idea of spreading the lyrics of popular songs, for their hidden meaning... Wasn’t very hidden, only to me. That was a wonderful experience. And, when people asked me about the dictatorship — the *ditadura* —, I would say: “I didn’t see it.” But I knew it was there. People talked about it. But the people that they’d affected, I never saw. Because you could live in Leblon forever and never see anybody like that.

I’ve been writing things lately, which I haven’t published because I don’t know quite how to publish them. But one of them is about learning languages. Because, as you know, my fellow Americans don’t learn languages. “Everybody speaks English”, they say. And the more they say it, the truer it becomes. And I say: “Well, they do and they don’t.” I mean, you people all speak enough English that I... You can fool me. I mean, it’s clear to me that you understand English. But my colleagues...

When I was a graduate student, in order to get your PhD, you had to demonstrate that you had a working knowledge of two languages, which were almost always French and German. Nobody that I graduated with knew any languages, including the Canadians, who were supposed to know two. So, Erving Goffman didn’t speak a word of French. You know, he was Canadian. It’s a bilingual country, right? No, it’s not. Different parts are one language or the other language. So, none of my colleagues that I was in graduate school with ever read anything... No, I take it back, there was one exception: a very interesting sociologist named Gregory Stone. For some reason, which I never learned, he actually knew French and German. We just regarded this as some kind of miracle. You know, something had happened to him. But we never learned it.

So, when I came to Brazil, that was the first language I learned. I was middle aged. And, after my friend from the Ford Foundation somehow talked me into coming to Brazil, I spent a year going to the language laboratory. This is the way I learned Portuguese, with a tape. And the tape played something, then you repeated it, and then the tape played to you what you had said, and you heard how different what you said was from what you knew it was

supposed to be. So, you'd learn to do it again and again and again. And, you know, it took me a year to have a halfway decent *carioca* accent and to be able to converse when I came to Rio de Janeiro. But then it was a wonderful thing to learn Portuguese. It was even better that I learned I could learn a language.

So, when I wanted to do the Sociology of Art... As you probably know, there was never any really great stuff in the Sociology of Art. There was very little. There was a lot of fancy theory, coming from the Frankfurt School, so it's in German. And it was useless. First of all, nobody could read it. And second of all, it wasn't really the kind of Sociology that we had learned to do. It wasn't empirical. It was always theoretical, and how this kind of art goes with that kind of society. It wasn't about musicians playing in bars. It wasn't anything like that. Or actors actually being on a stage and performing. So, I decided I was going to revolutionize the Sociology of Art, which was a very ambitious undertaking. Of course, I didn't revolutionize anything. But I opened a little path for others to follow.

And one of the things was when I was visiting... The same time when I was in England, that I spoke of before, I went to Paris for six days, and I met a student of mine from Northwestern named Malcolm Spector. He was from St. Louis; he was an all-American. And he had gone to McGill University in Montreal to teach. And Montreal was bilingual, that is to say there were French speakers and English speakers there. But none of the English speakers spoke French. That's how it was. So, Malcolm, being a stubborn person, decided he was going to learn French, and he did. And he could communicate across that barrier. So, he came to France to spend a year, and he had a great time. And when I told him that I wanted to do Sociology of Art, he took me by the arm and pulled me into a bookstore and said: "There's a book here you have to read." I said: "I don't read French." He said: "Well, you are going to start. You have to read French." This is how my students talk to me. He dragged me into the bookstore, and we bought a book called *Le Marché de l'art*, by Raymonde Moulin, who was a wonderful sociologist of art. She was terrific. And she had quite a lot of students. So, I read the book. Because I knew, from reading Gilberto's books, how to start reading, which is: you start on the first page, you look up every word in the dictionary, then, on the second page, you look up almost every word on the second page and then you learn a few more words. By the time you finish the book, you can read it. That's how you do it. It's a big secret.

But then it turned out that I was the only American anywhere that I knew of that had read that book or knew of its existence, even though they claimed to be sociologists of art. That was a big lesson to me. So, I've been preaching that lesson to everybody ever since. There was very little effect. Everybody says: "Oh, that's wonderful how you... Isn't that wonderful that you did that?" I say: "Well, you can do it." "Oh, no! I couldn't do it."

Celso Castro: I just remembered a story that Hermano told me when he was living in the United States. He was travelling by train from Chicago to Seattle or San Francisco, I'm not sure. It's a long trip. And there was an old lady sitting next to him who asked him: "Where are you from?" And Hermano said: "I'm from Brazil." "Oh, Brazil! So, you speak Spanish down there, don't you?" Hermano said: "No, we speak Portuguese." And the old lady was very intrigued by the answer. "Portuguese? You speak Portuguese? From Portugal, that small island in Europe?" And Hermano said: "Yes." "But why do you speak Portuguese?" And Hermano replied that it was for the same reason Americans speak English: from that small island in Europe! She was very puzzled because she never thought about it. I love this story.

Howard Becker: It's perfect.

Celso Castro: It was 1991 or 1992, when he was living in Chicago, and you moved the same year to Seattle.

Howard Becker: Dianne¹, when was Hermano in Chicago?

Dianne Hagaman: He was in Chicago, probably, in 1991, because he was in the performance class. And then we moved to Seattle, and he came and spent a few months in Seattle.

Howard Becker: Yes, that's what Celso was talking about. You have to write that down.

OK, well, listen... All of you are invited to come visit us here. You can't stay with us, but...

Celso Castro: Do you still live on Lombard Street?

Howard Becker: We still live on Lombard Street.

Celso Castro: Yes, the first time that I visited you, you said: "It's very easy. You'll see a lot of Japanese taking photos on the street. It's down there. It's the place I live."

Howard Becker: Yes.

Celso Castro: I think I visited you two or three times. In the last one we had a coffee in a coffeehouse nearby. And I planned to go this year. I already had the tickets, but due to the pandemic, I couldn't come to San Francisco.

Howard Becker: That's a shame.

Celso Castro: I promise I'll...

Howard Becker: Well, we'll be waiting for you. And any of the rest of you, if you think you are going to get near, let me know, and we can have a coffee. Not at that place, it closed. But in another place.

Celso Castro: So, Howie, thank you very much. It was a great pleasure to meet you again. And I'm sure that our students are very happy for having you here, talking to them, for several reasons, but, in this particular case, also because of your friendship with Gilberto, which is so present in his work. And, as I said, he always talked about you as a friend, not only as a bibliographical reference. And I think that Gilberto's students inherited this same

feeling of friendship with you. So, we are very, very glad to have you here and I hope we can meet again.

Howard Becker: I feel like I have scattered family around.

Celso Castro: Yes, you do. So, thank you all again. I will finish here. Thank you very much, Howie. It was a real pleasure.

Howard Becker: You're welcome. *Ciao*.

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NOTE

1. Dianne is Howie's wife.

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