Which side was Becker on? Questioning political and epistemological radicalism[1]

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ABSTRACT   Howard Becker's article 'Whose side are we on?' has been widely cited, and widely misunderstood. It has frequently been interpreted as recommending partisan research, or as suggesting that social research cannot be objective. This article examines Becker's position in detail, arguing that while there are some ambiguities within it, what it proposes is neither epistemologically nor politically radical in the way that is frequently assumed. What *is* true, though, is that Becker believes that systematic and rigorous sociological research inevitably tends to have radical political implications. In addition, he adopts a form of cultural relativism, whilst holding on to a notion of objectivity that is grounded in a commitment to pragmatism.

KEYWORDS: *objectivity, relativism, researcher partisanship, value neutrality*

Howard Becker's article 'Whose side are we on?', published in 1967, has been very widely cited in the literature of the social sciences.[2] Furthermore, there is considerable consensus about its message. It is generally taken to argue that sociologists are inevitably partisan, and that they should be explicitly so. Gouldner (1968) provided one of the earliest and most influential interpretations along these lines, even though he was critical of the *kind* of partisanship he took Becker's article to imply. And much the same interpretation prevails today. Thus, writing in 1995 about the work of the 'second Chicago School', Galliher (1995) describes the message of Becker's article as follows:

> ... he argued that since some type of bias is inevitable in all research on human subjects, to gain a full understanding of the world it is essential that we consciously take the perspective of the oppressed rather than the oppressor.

And he adds that:

> Becker's labelling theory of deviant behavior is consistent with his admitted political bias (pp. 169–70).

This is what I will call the radical reading of Becker's article, and I will begin by explicating it. Later, I will argue that, while there are important ambiguities, this interpretation of the article is mistaken.[3]

The radical reading

There are several elements of 'Whose side are we on?' which seem to advocate partisanship. The title itself assumes that we are forced to choose sides. And this is reinforced in the opening section of the article where Becker rejects value freedom as impossible, and explicitly states that: 'the question is not whether we should take sides, since we inevitably will, but whose side we are on' (p. 239). Moreover, against the background of Becker's work in the sociology of deviance, the implication seems to be that we should side with those in a subordinate position; hence Gouldner's (1968) labelling of Becker's position as 'underdog sociology'. This position could be described as politically radical, even though Gouldner argues that it is not radical enough and may still function to support the liberal establishment.[4]

Furthermore, on this reading Becker's article involves epistemological as well as political radicalism. Evidence for this is his remark that: '[. . .] there is no position from which sociological research can be done that is not biased in one way or another' (p. 245). The implication, it may seem, is that there is no objective viewpoint: people in different social locations necessarily have different perspectives, and the researcher must simply adopt one or other of these. This is a kind of relativism that has sometimes been associated with radical versions of the sociology of knowledge, in which 'truth' is no more than what passes for knowledge in a particular community, or what an individual decides is true for him or herself.[5]

This radical reading of Becker's article probably accounts for much of its continuing popularity: it is consonant with the growing influence in many areas of the social sciences of both political and epistemological radicalism, in the form of 'critical' approaches, of constructionism, and of postmodernism. And, as already noted, support for this reading of the article can be provided by seeing it in the context of the labelling theory of deviance, to which Becker made a major contribution in the 1950s and 60s. In fact, we can treat the article as in some respects an application of labelling theory to the case of sociological work itself.

Labelling theory transformed the field of research on crime and deviance in several ways. Most obviously, it expanded the focus of inquiry to include the processes by which particular types of act, and particular people, come to be labelled as deviant. In this way, the labellers as well as the labelled became objects of study. More fundamentally, on some interpretations, deviance was no longer to be treated as an objective feature of the world whose character could be taken for granted in order to explain why it happened, why changes in its incidence took place, why some groups committed more crimes of

particular kinds than others, and how crime rates could be reduced. Rather, what counts as deviance was now treated as a matter of social definition, so that the labelling process came to be regarded as *constitutive* of deviance rather than as merely identifying independently existing offences more or less accurately. In other words, 'deviance' was defined as 'behaviour labelled as deviant', with labelling as a process of social construction that is open to sociological study; and that *must* be studied if work in the field is not simply to take over the commonsense perspective promulgated by powerful groups in society.

Against the background of labelling theory, it is significant that in 'Whose side are we on?' Becker focuses primarily on *accusations* of bias, rather than on bias itself. He is mainly concerned with the conditions under which such accusations arise. He identifies two types of situation: what he calls the non-political and the political. In the former, there is a largely uncontested credibility hierarchy in terms of which those at the top of an organization or community are assumed to know best. While subordinates may privately hold views that contradict official ones, they are not politically mobilized and their views are not publicized. In this situation, Becker suggests, accusations of researcher bias are likely to come from superordinates, and will arise only when the social scientist does not conform to official views, for example by taking seriously the dissident perspectives of some subordinates. In the *political* situation, by contrast, there is a much more open conflict of views, with subordinates being mobilized against superordinates, and their perspectives promoted. As a result, there is no agreed credibility hierarchy. Here, accusations of bias can come from either or both sides, depending on the interpretations of the situation the sociologist adopts.

What this analysis implies is that, as with other kinds of deviance, 'bias' does not refer to some intrinsic feature of the behaviour involved; it is a matter of social definition. Accusations of bias are a product of the situation in which the sociologist works: it must not be assumed that a research study which is accused of bias is defective or culpable in some naturally given sense. While it may be biased from one point of view, it need not be from others; for instance, it may be seen that way by the powerful but not by the powerless. And the conclusion drawn from this by those who adopt what I am calling the radical reading of Becker's article is that the sociologist is simply faced with a choice about whose perspective to adopt, with bias being a function of the relationship between that decision and the dominant views within the situation studied. If the researcher takes the point of view of the powerful, there are unlikely to be accusations of bias, at least in the non-political situation. However, if the point of view of subordinates is adopted, the sociologist will probably be accused of bias whatever the situation. On this reading of the article, 'bias' is a relative and contingent matter which depends on who is in power and the stance the researcher takes towards them[6].

SOME CONTRA-INDICATIONS

It is quite clear, then, that there are elements of 'Whose side are we on?' which can be read as insisting on the inevitability of bias: that the researcher cannot avoid taking sides, and that he or she will often be accused of bias, especially by those in power. Furthermore, in line with Becker's work on labelling theory, bias seems to be presented as a contingent product of the situation in which sociologists work, rather than as a feature of that work. And these elements of the article have often been taken to imply that Becker was recommending active partisanship: that we must choose whose side to be on.

At the same time, however, there are features of the article that do not fit this radical reading of it. We can get some purchase on a different interpretation by noting an important ambiguity in labelling theory which was highlighted by a number of commentators (Pollner, 1974; Rains, 1975; Fine, 1977). Labelling theorists did not consistently deny that deviance exists independently of its labelling by law enforcement agencies and others. The idea was sometimes retained that deviance is a feature of particular forms of action, rather than simply a product of societal reaction. An example of this ambiguity is to be found in a typology presented by Becker in his book *Outsiders* (1973: Fig.3, p. 20) presented here as Figure 1 below:

FIGURE 1   *The relationship between labelling and behaviour*

	TYPES OF BEHAVIOUR	
PERCEPTIONS OF BEHAVIOUR	*Obedient behaviour*	*Rule-breaking behaviour*
Perceived as deviant	Falsely accused	Pure deviant
Not perceived as deviant	Conforming person	Secret deviant

(derived from Becker 1973: p. 20)

Despite Becker's constructionist slogan (1973: 9) that 'deviant behavior is behavior people so label', in this diagram he acknowledges the possibilities both of people being 'falsely accused' and of 'secret deviance'. And these possibilities assume that deviance can be identified by the analyst independently of whether or not it has been officially labelled as such. Indeed, even the analytic distinction between obedient and rule-breaking behaviour seems to be unsustainable from a constructionist point of view.

In identifying this ambiguity, labelling theory's critics argue that it runs together two incompatible positions. The first is the constructionist approach that underpins what I have referred to as the radical reading of Becker's article. If this is applied consistently, the exclusive focus of analysis becomes the social processes by which deviance is defined, and in particular the discursive strategies that are employed to do this. Deviance has no existence

independently of these strategies and therefore cannot be studied in itself. Indeed, the specific concern with law enactment and enforcement agencies may largely disappear in favour of an interest in the practice of deviance attribution wherever it occurs.[7]

The other version of labelling theory does not involve this kind of epistemological radicalism, but rather a realist view which treats activities as deviant or not deviant in terms of their relationship to some set of moral or legal rules, irrespective of whether they have actually been so labelled. Indeed, one of the central interests is the degree of mismatch between what *could be* labelled as deviant and what *is actually* labelled; drawing attention to the possibility of *discriminatory application* of the rules.[8] Also given attention are the *effects* of labelling, and the possibility that it might amplify deviance.

The constructionist and realist versions of labelling theory are incompatible. It is not possible to identify discriminatory or spurious labelling if deviance cannot be identified independently of the labelling process. Similarly, the concept of deviance amplification requires that the actual level of deviant activity be measurable by the analyst in order to show that it has increased, a possibility which constructionism denies.

This ambiguity in labelling theory has a direct parallel in 'Whose side are we on?'. As already noted, Becker seems to define 'bias' in terms of *accusations* of bias, explaining how bias arises not in terms of the behaviour of the researcher but according to the conditions in which he or she works, and the interests of powerful others. Thus, he seems to treat bias as nothing more than behaviour on the part of the social scientist that is so labelled. And this constructionist view corresponds with more recent arguments to the effect that notions of validity and bias are ideological, designed to ensure that research supports the interests of dominant groups; or at least that their legitimacy is relative to a particular epistemological paradigm. In fact, though, Becker's discussion of bias in 'Whose side are we on?' extends beyond a concern with external accusations of bias, and in doing so he deviates from the constructionist position in two important respects.

First of all, he notes in passing that sociologists may suspect *themselves* of bias for much the same reasons as do others. In parallel terms, it was sometimes explicitly recognized by labelling theorists that deviants are often only too aware that they are engaging in activities that would be regarded as deviant by others. And it is only a short step from this to acknowledging that they may sometimes engage in activities that *they themselves* regard as illegitimate, at least potentially. Attention has been given to the ways in which justifications or excuses are used by deviants to account for their actions, both to others and to themselves; explaining why their actions are legitimate or allowable despite the appearance of immorality or the fact of illegality (Cressey, 1950, 1953; Sykes and Matza, 1957; Matza, 1964). This suggests that notions of morality and law are frequently built into the very constitution of some acts, long before these come to be labelled as deviant by

others. And this also seems to apply to research: after all, researchers are guided by methodological considerations about what conclusions can and cannot be drawn on the basis of the evidence collected, what further evidence may be required, etc. As a result, bias is a focus of concern for researchers themselves not just for other interested parties.

This first point is not necessarily incompatible with social constructionism. It may be argued that self-labelling is a product of the internalization of the dominant social norms by the deviant. And this argument can be applied to the case of research; with concepts like objectivity being presented as the product of a methodology that is infused by the culture of positivism or by patriarchal ideology. While it does not follow that simply because social norms are internalized they must be socially oppressive, this often seems to be assumed. And one reading of the whole modernist project in epistemology suggests that its logical end point is the conclusion that any notion of method, or any concept of truth as external to the researcher, is a constraint on freedom (Pippin, 1991).

However, the second respect in which Becker (1967) moves beyond a concern with external accusations of bias cannot be reconciled with the radical reading of his article. Early on, he draws a distinction between why accusations of bias are made and the truth of those accusations, a distinction that cannot be formulated within constructionism:

> I will look first . . . not at the truth or falsity of the charge [of bias], but rather at the circumstances in which it is typically made and felt. The sociology of knowledge cautions us to distinguish between the truth of a statement and an assessment of the circumstances under which that statement is made; though we trace an argument to its source in the interests of the person who made it, we have still not proved it false (p. 240).

Here Becker commits himself to a moderate approach to the sociology of knowledge, rather than to what I referred to earlier as its more radical form. Moreover, he promises to address the issue of the validity of accusations later. And, indeed, three-quarters of the way through his article, he returns to this issue. He comments: 'What I have said so far is all sociology of knowledge, suggesting by whom, in what situations and for what reasons sociologists will be accused of bias and distortion' (p. 245). Furthermore, what he says in the closing pages of his article leaves behind the sociology of knowledge, and conflicts with what is implied by a 'radical' reading of his argument.

First of all, he recognizes that the researcher can take account of more than one perspective, rather than simply having to line up with one side or the other. Thus, he writes, 'no matter what perspective he takes, [the sociologist's] work either will take account of the attitude of subordinates, or it will not.' Here the question being addressed no longer seems to be whose side the researcher is on but rather whether he or she simply adopts the views of the powerful or takes account of those of the less powerful as well. Moreover, Becker notes that the distinction between a superordinate and a

subordinate is a relative one. He comments: 'Is it not true that the superordinates in a hierarchical relationship usually have their own superordinates with whom they must contend?' (p. 246). And he continues:

> . . . if a prison administrator is angered because we take the complaints of his inmates seriously, we may feel that we can get around that and get a more balanced picture by interviewing him and his associates. If we do, we may then write a report which *his* superiors will respond to with cries of 'bias'. They, in their turn, will say that we have not presented a balanced picture, because we have not looked at *their* side of it. And we may worry that what they say is true (p. 247).

Becker points to the problem of 'infinite regress' here: 'for everyone has someone standing above him who prevents him from doing things just as he likes.' Thus, he concludes: 'we can never have a "balanced picture" until we have studied all of society simultaneously'; and, he adds, 'I do not propose to hold my breath to that happy day' (p. 247).

From this it seems that the problem is not that an objective or balanced view is impossible in principle but rather that it is very difficult to achieve in practice, and that we have to carry on with our work before it is achieved (indeed, if we did not do so it could never be achieved). This is reinforced right at the end of the article when Becker writes:

> It is something of a solution to say that over the years each 'one-sided' study will provoke further studies that gradually enlarge our grasp of all the relevant facets of an institution's operation. But that is a long-term solution, and not much help to the individual researcher who has to contend with the anger of officials who feel he has done them wrong, the criticism of those of his colleagues who think he is presenting a one-sided view, and his own worries (p. 247).

The second kind of evidence against the radical interpretation of Becker's article to be found in its closing pages is the fact that he not only recognizes that accusations of bias may be true, but also that it is the researcher's responsibility to try to avoid bias. He writes: 'our problem is to make sure that, whatever the point of view we take, our research meets the standards of good scientific work, that our unavoidable sympathies do not render our results invalid.' (p. 246). He then elaborates on this, noting the ways in which 'we might distort our findings, because of our sympathy with one of the parties in the relationship we are studying, by misusing the tools and techniques of our discipline'. And he insists that:

> by using our theories and techniques *impartially* [emphasis added], we ought to be able to study all the things that need to be studied in such a way as to get all the facts we require, even though some of the questions that will be raised and some of the facts that will be produced run counter to our biases (p. 246).

Indeed, Becker warns against what he refers to as 'sentimentality': the refusal to investigate some matter that should properly be regarded as

problematic. And he clarifies this as follows: 'We are sentimental, especially, when . . . we would prefer not to know what is going on, if to know would be to violate some sympathy whose existence we may not even be aware of'. He concludes this part of his argument as follows:

> Whatever side we are on, we must use our techniques impartially enough that a belief to which we are especially sympathetic could be proved untrue. We must always inspect our work carefully enough to know whether our techniques and theories are open enough to allow that possibility (p. 246).

These comments conflict sharply with the reading of Becker's article as advocating political and epistemological radicalism in the form of partisanship. Emphasis on the need for researchers to be as impartial as possible is discrepant with the idea that they are unavoidably or justifiably partisan. Moreover, in these passages, Becker explicitly recognizes that bias is not simply constituted by accusations of bias: that there is a real danger of researchers allowing their analyses to be swayed by their sympathies, *and* that this source of bias can be (and ought to be) minimized by taking precautions against it. What is implied here is a rather conventional conception of the requirements of social scientific work; indeed, one that can be labelled as adherence to the principle of value neutrality (see Becker, 1973: 198). It is assumed that there are real phenomena to be described and explained, phenomena that exist independently of our interpretations of them. And Becker sees science as having privileged access to knowledge of these phenomena as a result of its methodological orientation, which should be geared to the production of objective knowledge through efforts to avoid bias.

RESOLVING THE AMBIGUITIES

There is strong evidence, then, within 'Whose side are we on?', which counts against the radical reading.[9] However, this does not entirely resolve the ambiguity we have identified in the article. It does not explain how the evidence that supported the radical reading is to be re-interpreted. When faced with an ambiguity, initially at least, we should act on the assumption that there was a coherent message, and explore ways in which the ambiguity could be a product of misreading.[10] This does not mean that we cannot subsequently conclude that there is a fundamental inconsistency in Becker's position, but rather that we should only reach that conclusion after all the plausible ways of eliminating it have been explored. Nor are we prevented from criticizing Becker's position in other ways; but it is important that we try to ensure that we do so on the basis of a sound understanding of what his position is.

It is worth noting that Becker does not seem to regard his arguments as carrying contradictory implications in either political or epistemological terms (Becker, 1973), and I want to suggest that this is understandable given the background assumptions on which he relies.

Political radicalism

To point up the ambiguity in Becker's article, we might say that he argues both that we cannot avoid taking sides and that we should avoid taking sides. But, in large part, this ambiguity stems from his use of the terms 'bias' and 'taking sides' to cover several different matters. And there is a way of summarizing his argument which removes this ambiguity, and which accounts for all of the data in the article:

> Becker employs three senses of 'bias' in terms of which researchers *cannot avoid* being biased. First of all, they are constantly in danger of being biased in the sense of being accused of bias, because of the nature of the situations in which they work. In much of his discussion, and in line with some interpretations of labelling theory, Becker does not distinguish explicitly between such accusations and actual bias on the part of the researcher, even though there are other places where he recognizes this distinction. The second sense in which bias may be unavoidable is that researchers often have more sympathy for some of the people in the situations they study than for others; and as a result they may find the views of those people especially plausible. This follows from the fact that researchers are human beings, that they themselves belong to society and will therefore have their own commonsense assumptions, political views, and personal preferences. A third sense in which sociologists cannot avoid being biased is that they cannot take account of every possible point of view: there is a practical limit to the number of perspectives that can be incorporated into any study. As a result, there is always the danger that some key feature of a situation has been overlooked because the particular perspective from which it would have been highlighted was not used in the analysis.

> However, Becker also uses a fourth sense of 'bias', in terms of which we *need not,* and *should not*, be biased. By using our disciplinary theories and methods we ought to be able to avoid external pressures or internal sympathies leading us into systematic error, and we must take all available precautions against this.

It is a key feature of Becker's position that the relationships among these four types of bias are not tight. Thus, not being biased in the final sense does not ensure that researchers will not be viewed as partisan. Indeed, in many circumstances it is precisely when they do their work well that such accusations are very likely to arise. Becker's discussion of the political and non-political situations is intended to demonstrate this (see also Becker, 1964). Similarly, he does not see any necessary relationship between being more sympathetic to the views of one party in a situation and systematic error. By taking the proper precautions, sentimentality should be avoidable. So, in large part, the ambiguity of Becker's article stems from his failure to indicate clearly which of these four senses of the term 'bias' or 'taking sides' he is using at any particular point; and/or from the failure of readers to recognize this from the relevant contexts of use.

   The above summary suggests that the politically radical reading of 'Whose side are we on?' is mistaken: Becker was not arguing that researchers must

choose which side they are on and do research in such a way as to serve it. There seems to me to be little doubt about this. However, I suspect that there *is* nevertheless a sense in which Becker sees sociological research as politically partisan *in its effects*. In his response to criticisms of labelling theory, he comments at one point: 'interactionist theories look (and are) rather Left. Intentionally or otherwise, they are corrosive of the conventional modes of thought and established institutions' (1973: 197). And, in an article co-authored with Irving Louis Horowitz, he argues that sociologists cannot help being politically radical: that there is an isomorphism between good sociology and radical sociology (Becker and Horowitz, 1972: 50). 'Isomorphism' is probably misleading here, since Becker and Horowitz do not argue that doing sociology is *the same* as engaging in radical political activity. But they do point to significant overlap, and a functional relationship, between the two activities.

The first step of this argument is recognition that because sociologists do not simply accept official views but subject them to scrutiny, they tend to be seen as a threat by those in power. Becker (1973) comments:

> Elites, ruling classes, bosses, adults, men, Caucasians – superordinate groups generally – maintain their power as much by controlling how people define their world, its components, and its possibilities, as by the use of more primitive forms of control (pp. 204–5).

And, indeed, in 'Whose side are we on?', Becker argues that because officials are responsible for the running of institutions they 'usually have to lie' (pp. 242–3). As a result, good sociological work will be seen by those in power as subversive, and its effects *may be* subversive. One aspect of this is that sociologists:

> . . . violate society's hierarchy of credibility. They question the monopoly on the truth and the 'whole story' claimed by those in positions of power and authority. They suggest that we need to discover the truth about allegedly deviant phenomena for ourselves, instead of relying on the officially certified accounts which ought to be enough for any good citizen. They adopt a relativistic stance toward the accusations and definitions of deviance made by respectable people and constituted authority, treating them as the raw material of social science analysis rather than as statements of unquestioned moral truths (Becker, 1973: 207–8).

And if, in addition, sociological research confirms the validity of some of the views of subordinates who are critical of the way things are run, the offence of the sociologist is even greater.

However, most subversive of all is when, as in the case of labelling theory, the sociologist includes the activities of officials within the focus of his or her analysis; actually documenting their attempts to manipulate definitions, or to lie, so as to serve their own purposes. In doing this, the sociologist exposes the mechanisms of power and may thereby not only delegitimate and destabilize the position of the powerful but also point up how it can be challenged.

In these ways, then, while Becker does not argue that sociological work should be directed towards achieving political goals, he regards its *effects* as politically radical, in that they threaten the dominant power structure. Of course, we might interpret this as no more than a *description* of what actually happens. There is no *necessary* implication that this destabilizing effect is politically desirable.[11] So, it is not just that the politically radical effects of sociological research will not be directly intended by the sociologist, but also that they will not always be seen as desirable from his or her point of view.

However, there is some evidence that Becker *does* regard these radical effects as politically progressive. He sees the sociologist who takes account of the views of underdogs, who disregards the dominant credibility hierarchy, and who documents the manipulative strategies used by those in power, as playing a role in a wider political movement to which all sociologists are effectively committed, whether they recognize it or not. Thus, Becker and Horowitz (1972) not only argue that sociological work which supports the status quo is typically of poor quality, and that good sociology tends to be radical in its consequences, but also imply that this radicalism is politically progressive. They outline the founding assumptions of radical politics as follows:

> . . . where circumstances compel a choice between individual interests, self-expression and personal welfare, on the one hand, and social order, stability, and the collective good, on the other, [. . .] a radical politics acts for the person as against the collectivity. It acts to maximise the number and the variety of options people have open to them, at the expense of neatness, order, peace and system (p. 52).

And, similarly, the authors declare that 'radical sociology . . . rests on a desire to change society in a way that will increase equality and maximise freedom, and it makes a distinctive contribution to the struggle for change' (pp. 52–3). The terms the authors employ here to describe radicalism are of a kind which imply its virtue. Moreover, they state their own allegiance to this radical politics:

> We ourselves believe that every society and every set of social arrangements must be inspected for their potential inequalities and interferences with freedom, even those which seem to conform to one or another blueprint for a socialist utopia . . . . While we look for the convergence of personal and public goals, when we are compelled to make a choice, it is on behalf of persons (p. 52).

What this suggests, I think, is that while Becker regards science and progressive politics as distinct, and even recognizes that they may occasionally come into conflict, he assumes that there is a fundamental affinity between them in the way they operate in the world.

There is evidence to suggest, then, that at the time he wrote 'Whose side are we on?' Becker may not only have believed that sociology is politically radical in its effects but also that this radicalism is desirable. But it is

important to note that the central message of Becker and Horowitz's (1972) article is that political radicalism requires good sociology, and that this involves adherence to traditional methodological requirements. These authors explicitly warn against tailoring sociological work to suit political demands. Indeed, at one point they comment that 'the radical sociologist will . . . find that his scientific "conservatism" – in the sense of being unwilling to draw conclusions on the basis of insufficient evidence – creates tensions with radical activists' (p. 55). We can summarize what these authors say as follows: by resisting taking sides, in the sense of trying to be impartial and scientific, the sociologist will nevertheless serve the struggle of the underdogs against the powerful, and thereby further the pursuit of freedom and equality. Indeed, a scientific sociology will be more effective in political terms than one that is biased in a radical direction. Sociological work necessarily erodes the power of those at the top by undermining their control of knowledge, and in doing so it facilitates the emergence of organizations, communities and societies in which power differences are abolished or at least reduced.

What emerges from this discussion is that 'Whose side are we on?' does not call for partisan research in the sense of research designed to serve the interests of one side rather than another in society. For Becker, any political radicalism that sociological work has is necessarily a by-product of a sound scientific approach. And in this respect his article is sharply at odds with much recent advocacy of researcher partisanship, some of which appeals to the radical reading of his article for support.[12]

Epistemological radicalism

In many respects, the discussion in the previous section has resolved not just the question of whether 'Whose side are we on?' advocates political partisanship but also its epistemological ambiguity. It is clear that what Becker meant by the inevitability of taking sides was that researchers could not avoid the risk of being accused of bias, avoid having sympathies for some people rather than others, or take into account the views of everyone. There is no clear evidence to suggest that he was arguing that there are simply different factual views of the world, all equally valid. Indeed, he holds out the possibility of getting the whole picture by putting many partial studies together. And he insists on the importance of trying to prevent both official pressure and personal sympathies distorting research, and on the need for the sociologist to be committed to the scientific pursuit of objective knowledge. In his reply to Riley's claim that his article advocates a relativistic position, he describes his focus as having been on accusations of bias, not on actual bias. In other words, what he offered was a sociological analysis of bias, not a philosophical or a methodological one. And the fact that discussion of actual bias and how it can be combated constitutes only a small

part of the article, suggests that Becker probably regarded it as voicing fairly obvious methodological principles that needed no more than a mention. In the sociological context in which he was writing, these principles were neither novel nor contentious. The distinctive contribution of the article, from the point of view of its author, clearly lay in his application of a moderate sociology of knowledge perspective to the work of sociologists themselves, thereby illuminating some of the problems they face, notably the negative reactions of others to their work.

Furthermore, this interpretation fits with the clarification of his approach to the sociology of deviance that Becker provided in response to criticism (Becker, 1973). There, he acknowledges the contradiction between the idea that deviance is what is so labelled, on the one hand, and references to secret deviance and false accusations, on the other. And he sought to resolve it by reformulating the distinction between obedient and rule-breaking behaviour as that between actions that are open to labelling as deviant in terms of a particular set of rules and those which are not. In this manner he adopts what I have been calling a realist rather than a constructionist approach. And it is one that is non-evaluative: there is no implication that any particular set of rules is morally justified (and there are only hints that current ones might not be). For Becker, the central features of labelling theory are that rules defining what is deviant vary across and within societies; that we cannot assume a direct correspondence between what *could be* labelled as deviant and what *is actually* so labelled; and, finally, that labelling can amplify rather than discourage deviance.

All this said, I think there is some residual ambiguity of an epistemological kind in 'Whose side are we on?', and this can be highlighted by looking more carefully at the parallel between Becker's treatment of bias and his work on deviance. Even in its reformulated version, Becker's approach to deviance treats that phenomenon as very much a social product, in the sense that what is deviant cannot be identified independently of some culturally variable set of rules for identifying it. In other words, although the acts labelled as deviant exist before and independently of the rules, their character as deviant does not. Above all, he insists that moral and legal rules do not identify intrinsic features of the acts which they pick out as deviant.

Now, if we were to apply this approach to the sociology of knowledge, what we would get is similar to the kind of sociology of science that has come to be referred to as the 'strong programme'.[13] This treats what is accepted as scientific knowledge at any particular time as socially defined, in much the same manner that Becker treats what counts as deviance as socially defined. It specifically renounces any concern with whether the 'knowledge' it focuses on is sound, treating this as irrelevant to the task of explaining how it came to be accepted as knowledge; just as for the most part Becker resists any temptation to pronounce on whether particular sets of moral or legal rules are justified, or particular acts are wrong. And for much of 'Whose side are

we on?' he adopts the same attitude towards bias, focusing on the conditions that lead to the labelling of studies, or of particular knowledge claims, as biased. However, as we saw, later on in that article he does also address the issue of *actual* bias and how it can be avoided. In other words, when it comes to the sociologist's own methodological concern with bias, Becker abandons the sociology of knowledge: his focus becomes how sociologists can maximize their chances of producing valid conclusions. Here bias is not treated simply as what would be identified as bias in terms of some particular conception of science. It is now treated as a variable feature of the behaviour of the researcher. And, in doing this, Becker takes the nature of science, and the commitment of researchers to it, as given and proper.

On this reading, then, some ambiguity arises from the way that Becker combines the sociology of knowledge and methodological arguments in the same article. The former is non-evaluative or value-neutral in character: it does not assume that the moral, legal or cognitive rules relevant to the field being studied are valid, or for that matter invalid; or that particular actions are intrinsically right or wrong, rational or irrational; or that particular statements are intrinsically true or false. By contrast, methodology is inherently normative: from its point of view, conformity to or deviation from scientific method is an intrinsic feature of the behaviour of the researcher, rather than solely a function of the labelling process. Where Becker the sociologist of knowledge adopts a relativistic position, in the strict sense of suspending judgement about the validity of accusations of bias, Becker the methodologist cannot do this.

So, at least to some extent, what epistemological ambiguity there is in Becker's article stems from the fact that he carries out both sociological and methodological analysis side by side within it. While, throughout his article, he makes explicit the distinction between the sociology of knowledge and the concern with actual bias, by including both orientations within a single article he creates some potential for an epistemologically radical reading of it. And, of course, such radicalism *is* to be found both in some constructionist approaches to the study of social problems (Holstein and Miller, 1993) and in later versions of the sociology of science (see, for example, Woolgar, 1988).

However, I suspect that even this does not entirely dispose of the epistemological ambiguity in Becker's position. At one point in 'Whose side are we on?', Becker refers to the views of George Herbert Mead. Becker comments: 'The scientist who proposes to understand society must, as Mead long ago pointed out, get into the situation enough to have a perspective on it' (1967: 245); and Riley (1974a: 127) takes this as indicating Becker's commitment to a relativistic epistemology. This has particular significance because there has been a long-running dispute about pragmatism over whether it is a form of realism or idealism. The pragmatists' own answer to this, including that of Mead, was that it is neither; but for many commentators this simply leaves its epistemological position uncertain.

It is fundamental to Mead's philosophy that mind must be understood naturalistically as a product of evolution, and that as such its role is to bring about adaptation of organism to environment. And it is out of the trans-action between these that perspectives arise. This does not involve the organism in simply learning about objects whose character is fixed independently of it. Mead retained sufficient of the idealism he had learned from Royce and Hegel to see the transaction as two-way. He seems to regard the environment as in flux and as to a large extent unformed, so that even the structures that appear in an objective perspective (one that is shared by a group rather than being idiosyncratic) are relative to the human organism's capacities and needs (these also being subject to change). At the same time, the implication is not that these structures are arbitrary constructions on the part of the organism. Instead, we might see them as potentials inherent in the environment that are *realized* in the perspective as a result of human activity.

There is little sign of the direct influence of these ideas in Becker's article. Instead, his reference to Mead seems to relate to one of the lessons drawn from Mead by Blumer: that close familiarity with the perspectives of the people whose behaviour one is trying to understand is required for social research. And elsewhere I have argued that Blumer's methodological arguments imply a form of realism, influenced as much by Cooley, Thomas and Park as by the 'objective relativism' or 'emergent realism' of Dewey and Mead (Hammersley, 1989). Nevertheless, there is evidence in Becker's more recent work of the influence of this aspect of pragmatism, and I will end this section by examining it.

In the introduction to his collection of papers, *Doing Things Together*, Becker (1986) comments that: 'the papers in this collection don't so much argue as exemplify a position that accepts what seems to be a contradiction: that reality is socially constructed but that knowledge, while thus relative, is not wholly up for grabs' (p. 3). And what he goes on to say illustrates this apparent contradiction. Thus, he describes himself as a 'confirmed relativist' (p. 6) and insists that knowledge 'is what I can get other people to accept' (p. 3). There are two aspects to this argument. First, the researcher necessarily asks some questions and not others, and 'the selection of topics for investigation can never be justified logically or scientifically'. Secondly, just as selection of topics is based on 'the common practice of those who make such inquiries' so too is 'how to find an answer' and 'what constitutes an answer good enough for our purposes' (p. 3). Here Becker appeals to the analogy with games, emphasizing that the rules of a game often change over time. Further on, he emphasizes that we always judge the validity of knowledge claims or ways of knowing from within a particular culture, and that cultures vary in the judgements they generate. All of this tends to imply a commitment to an epistemological relativism of some kind.

However, there are also places in this introduction where Becker seems to

adopt a realist perspective, hinting at the universality of truth even while emphasizing the relativity of all justification. Much like Mead, he holds out the prospect of more universal perspectives, arguing that 'we can improve our knowledge and get more people to accept it by broadening the range of what we ask about, and of the kinds of acceptable answers' (p. 5). He also indicates his rejection of some kinds of social constructionism on philosophical grounds:

> Some versions of phenomenological sociology (the ones that preface every noun with "The Social Construction of . . .") seem to suggest that there is no reality, only interpretations, whose only warrant is that a lot of people accept them. In such a situation no one could ever be wrong; at worst they would simply have failed to persuade others that they were right. In such a situation there could be no science or scholarship, no logical proof or empirical confirmation of ideas and propositions' (p. 2).

And, in discussing the clash between mainstream American culture today and the witchcraft beliefs of the Zapotec, he recognizes that, because their views are integrated into a whole pattern of belief and behaviour, each side is unlikely to be persuaded by the arguments of the other; but he believes that the Zapotec *are* likely to change their beliefs in the context of joint practical activity. Moreover, he sees asking a wider range of questions than our own culture would lead us to as increasing our chances of 'not being wrong' (p. 6). This suggests that he is committed to some kind of realism, that the relativism that he espouses is cultural rather than epistemological. Where anthropologists had opposed ethnocentrism in the study of non-western societies (see, for example, Herskovits, 1972), Hughes, Becker, and others have extended this attitude into the investigation of low status cultures and subcultures *within* American society (see Chapoulie, 1996: 22–3). This involved not just an emphasis on cultural diversity but also an insistence that the validity of the dominant views in any society must not be assumed.

I think we must conclude, then, that Becker's position is not entirely free from epistemological ambiguity; but his attitude towards this is probably a phlegmatic one. He would argue, I suspect, that he has not claimed to resolve all the problems that attend sociology, even less those of philosophy. His approach is one that works in producing sociological knowledge, and he has not found it necessary to try to resolve the issue of whether and how objective knowledge is possible. He assumes that it is, even while recognizing cultural diversity. Such a response would reflect the kind of commonsense pragmatism that is quite closely related to many forms of philosophical pragmatism. And it is probably essential to any kind of research. However, it does leave some questions unanswered; and, given that Becker believes progress is made precisely by widening the range of questions we address, there must be a case for giving them further attention, even from his point of view.

Conclusion

In this article I have argued against the radical reading of Becker's article 'Whose side are we on?', which interprets it as implying that political partisanship (in the sense of doing research in such a way as to serve some political cause) is inevitable or desirable. I pointed to some ambiguities in the text: there are parts that support the radical reading, while there are others which run counter to it. I suggested that these ambiguities could be largely overcome by recognizing the different senses in which Becker uses the term 'bias' or 'taking sides'. At the same time, I argued that he probably does view sound, scientific sociological research as having radical political consequences, and does believe that these contribute to the desirable goal of increasing equality and freedom. But it is clear that he regards this 'partisanship' as inadvertent, even though desirable: it is a byproduct of objective research. I also suggested that the epistemological conflict between the constructionist understanding of bias provided by the radical reading and the realist view that seems to be implied in key sections of Becker's article could be resolved by distinguishing between the non-evaluative or value-neutral character of sociology and the necessarily evaluative character of methodology. Most of the epistemological ambiguity in 'Whose side are we on?' arises from the fact that it combines sociological and methodological analysis. I concluded, though, by suggesting that there is some residual ambiguity at quite a fundamental level in Becker's position, deriving from the influence of pragmatist philosophy.

The ambiguity in Becker's article can be underlined by the fact that its message could be reformulated as a defence of the principle of value neutrality in the face of the failure of much sociology at the time to live up to that principle. Interestingly, this is precisely how Polsky (1967) presented his position, one that conforms closely to Becker's. Of course, had Becker written his article in this way, it probably would not have attracted much attention at all.[14] It would not have been treated as the political challenge to conventional sociology that it has usually been taken to be. Yet, interpreted more accurately, it continues to have relevance for us today, not least in posing fundamental questions that still need answering.

NOTES

1. This is a shortened and slightly revised version of Chapter 3 from Hammersley (2000), reproduced by kind permission of Routledge.
2. In the Social Sciences Citation Index there were over a hundred citations of this article between 1980 and 2000.
3. Much the same misinterpretation is to be found in some discussions of Goffman's *Asylums*. For example, Fine and Martin interpret his comment that 'to describe the patient's situation faithfully is necessarily to present a partisan view' (Goffman, 1961: x) as evidence that the book was intended as a 'political tract' (Fine and Martin, 1990: 110) which uses 'literary terrorism' (p. 99) to present

psychiatric institutions as 'dehumanizing' (p. 109), and patients as 'morally preferable to their keepers' (p. 91). According to these authors, Goffman uses satire, and other rhetorical devices, as a weapon to remedy the gap between how things are and how they ought to be (p. 101). In my view, Goffman's position is very similar to that of Becker. In the preface to *Asylums* he refers to his work as 'pure research', without any trace of irony. And elsewhere he describes himself as an urban ethnographer in the tradition of Hughes, and indicates his commitment to the regulative ideal of 'value-freedom' (Verhoeven, 1993: 318–19).

4. Gouldner softened his attitude towards Becker's position later, see Gouldner, 1973a: 463, 1973b: xiii.
5. For an interpretation of Becker's article along these lines, see Riley, 1974a. See also Becker, 1974 and Riley, 1974b.
6. For another application of what I am calling epistemological radicalism to the concept of bias, see McHugh et al., 1974. Earlier, Blum (1970) and McHugh (1970) had applied the same approach to deviance.
7. This is the position adopted by Kitsuse: see Kitsuse, 1962; Rains, 1975; Spector and Kitsuse, 1977; Ibarra and Kitsuse, 1993. See Holstein and Miller, 1993 for diverse assessments of Kitsuse's 'strict constructionism'.
8. Thus, Lemert (1967, 1974) was concerned with assessing the difference between warranted and unwarranted societal reaction, see Rains, 1975. See also Goode and Ben Yehuda's (1994: ch. 3) attempts to define 'moral panic' as an excessive or unwarranted societal reaction.
9. This evidence is reinforced by Becker's response to Riley's critique of 'Whose side are we on?', see Becker, 1974.
10. This can be justified by what is often called the principle of charity (see Grice, 1989). See also Gadamer's argument that interpretation involves projection of a coherent whole (Warnke, 1987).
11. Indeed, there are those who see it as undesirable and in need of restraint (see Shils, 1980).
12. See the discussion in the introduction to Hammersley (2000).
13. See Barnes, 1974 and Bloor, 1976. On subsequent developments in the social study of science, see Law and Lodge, 1984 and Woolgar, 1988.
14, Certainly, this section of Polsky's book has not done so.

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