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HOWARD S. BECKER

# Telling About Society

The University of Chicago Press : Chicago and London

2009.05864:1



Howard S. Becker, a sociologist and pianist who lives in San Francisco, is the author of *Writing for Social Scientists* and *Tricks of the Trade*.

The University of Chicago Press, Chicago 60637  
The University of Chicago Press, Ltd., London  
© 2007 by The University of Chicago  
All rights reserved. Published 2007  
Printed in the United States of America

16 15 14 13 12 11 10 09 08 07 1 2 3 4 5

ISBN-13: 978-0-226-04125-4 (cloth)

ISBN-13: 978-0-226-04126-1 (paper)

ISBN-10: 0-226-04125-5 (cloth)

ISBN-10: 0-226-04126-3 (paper)

**LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING-IN-PUBLICATION DATA**

Becker, Howard Saul, 1928-

Telling about society / Howard S. Becker.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN-13: 978-0-226-04125-4 (cloth : alk. paper)

ISBN-10: 0-226-04125-5 (cloth : alk. paper)

ISBN-13: 978-0-226-04126-1 (pbk. : alk. paper)

ISBN-10: 0-226-04126-3 (pbk. : alk. paper)

1. *Sociology—Methodology.* 2. *Visual sociology.* 3. *Sociology in literature.* 4. *Arts and society.* I. Title.

HM511.B43 2007

301.01—dc22

2006103504

© The paper used in this publication meets the minimum requirements of the American National Standard for Information Sciences—Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials, ANSI Z39.48-1992.

To the memory of Michèle de la Pradelle, Dwight Conquergood,  
Alain Pessin, and Eliot Freidson, friends and scholars

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## Preface

This was never a conventional research project. The ideas grew out of my habitually random and haphazard reading, years of teaching, and just plain living while being pretty eclectic in my interests.

I've always been a theater- and moviegoer and a tireless reader of fiction. I always thought I was learning interesting stuff about society when I did that, applying a rule I had formulated early in life, "If it's fun, it must be worth doing." So I was already primed with a good stock of examples to think about. I had seen Shaw's play *Mrs. Warren's Profession* and enjoyed its dissection of the "social problem" of prostitution, and so I had it in my mind when I started looking for examples. I had read Dickens and Jane Austen and had them as examples of how novelists presented social analysis.

In 1970 I learned, as part of my preparation for working in the sociology of the arts, to make photographs, taking classes at the San Francisco Art Institute and getting involved in the photographic world there and in Chicago. Documentary photographers worried with me about how to present the social analyses they wanted to make, as did the students I soon acquired, and I began to see how their problems resembled the ones social scientists (including myself) faced in telling what they had to tell.

I have never been good at reading the official literature of officially designated disciplines and fields and never thought social science had a monopoly on knowing what goes on in society. I found as many good ideas in fiction, drama, film, and photography as I did in what I was "supposed" to be reading. And the ideas that came to me as I looked at

documentary photographic projects or film migrated to my thinking about conventional social science as well.

I did do some serious reading in the polemical literature every field generates about problems of method. That literature contains much of what you might gather if you interviewed participants in those debates. The problems they raise are ones that confront practitioners in those fields, and the extended published discussions were immensely useful. Of course, when I had the chance to talk to people about problems of representation in their specific line of work, I jumped at it, but I didn't do any systematic interviewing or data gathering.

Teaching affected the development of my thinking in two very specific cases. When I taught sociology at Northwestern, I had the good fortune to cross paths with the late Dwight Conquergood, who taught in the Department of Performance Studies in the School of Speech. Dwight studied what he called the "performative aspect of society," the way social life can be seen as a series of performances. More to the point, he often presented the results of his research—on Southeast Asian refugees, on Chicago gang members—in the form of performances. This was something I had tried to do, without any real training and with no great success, with my colleagues Michal McCall and Lori Morris in a pair of sociological performances (Becker, McCall, and Morris 1989; Becker and McCall 1990) reporting on our collaborative research on theater communities in three cities. So when Dwight and I met, it was a short step to the idea of teaching a class called "Performing Social Science" together. His students came from his department and the larger Theater Department of the School of Speech; mine came mostly from sociology. They included graduate students and undergraduates. We taught the class in 1990 and 1991, and both times the main activity of the class consisted of performances by students (and, the second time, the teachers as well) of something that might be considered social science. Our definition was inclusive, so the pieces people did came from a variety of fields—history, sociology, literature, drama—and from the inventiveness of the students themselves. I'll occasionally refer to these events, which often embodied the organizational, scientific, and aesthetic concerns I'm interested in.

A class called "Telling About Society" that I taught twice, once at the University of California—Santa Barbara and a year later at the University of Washington, also gave me a lot to think about. The participants in this little adventure came from several departments and consisted almost entirely of graduate students. This meant that they were, inevitably, less adventurous than the undergraduates Conquergood and I had worked with at Northwestern, having more to lose and more pressing claims on their time and attention. On the other hand, they were more thoughtful about the ramifications of the topic, more willing to be critical and argumentative, and therefore more likely to provoke me to reopen questions I'd thought settled.

The class sessions took up different media each week: film, drama, statistical tables, and so on. I assigned readings or, just as often, presented the class with something to react to, some provocation to their stereotyped ideas of what constituted an appropriate way to report on society. I began the first meeting of the class, the first time I taught it, by describing Caryl Churchill's *Mad Forest* (1996), a play about a marriage between the children of two Romanian families that differ substantially in social class. The second act of the play illustrated exactly what the class might be about, since it is an artistic representation of the process social scientists sometimes called "elementary collective behavior" or "crowd formation." Chapter 12 tells how I made the students read the act aloud and then insisted to them that they had not only experienced an emotion but had also read the best analysis I knew of crowd formation. Many of them agreed. And I told them that set the problem of the class. What ways, other than the ones social scientists knew, can convey such information? I think many of the students would not have accepted that question as willingly if they had not had the theatrical experience they had just given themselves.

In succeeding weeks we saw Anna Deveare Smith's video *Fire in Crown Heights* (2001), in which she says the things many people from many social groups had said to her after that episode of violence in Brooklyn. We saw Frederick Wiseman's *Titicut Follies* (1967), a documentary film about a Massachusetts hospital for the criminally insane. We looked at and discussed a collection I had made of sociological tables and charts, and I taught a minicourse I was ill-prepared to

teach in mathematical models. I designed the seminar meetings with plenty of concrete examples to discuss, hoping to avoid what I thought would be sterile "theoretical" talk. My scheming worked pretty well, and the discussions were good enough that I usually spent the next day typing notes about our discussion and the thoughts it had stimulated.

In the class syllabus, I had told the students:

The basic strategy of the course is comparative. What's to be compared are a wide variety of genres of representation: from films, novels, and plays, on the one hand, to tables, charts, graphs, and mathematical models, on the other, and whatever else we can think of in between. They'll be compared with respect to the way they solve the generic problems of representing social life. And that list of problems will in part be generated by seeing what kinds of problems are prominent in each genre. (This will make more sense as we do it; I can see how it might seem a little cryptic right now.)

You can think of the subject matter we'll work with as a grid. Along one axis, kinds of media or genres, as in the list above. Along the other axis, problems that arise in making representations: the influence of budgets, the ethical obligations of makers of representations, ways of generalizing what one knows, degrees of polyvocality, etc. In principle, we could investigate every problem in every genre, fill in every box generated by that cross-classification, but that's not practical. So our "coverage" will be more than a little haphazard, influenced mainly by the materials we have easily available to talk about and by my own particular interests. But the list of what's to talk about can be extended to deal with other genres and problems, as the will of the people dictates.

And that attitude created the organizational problem of this book.

Robert Merton liked to find propositions that exemplified what they asserted, most successfully in his ideas about self-fulfilling prophecies. Putting this material together put me in just that position. How could I represent my analysis of representations?

I had two kinds of material to work with: ideas about communities organized around making and using particular kinds of representa-

tions, like films or novels or statistical tables; and examples, extended discussions of reports on society exemplifying what had been done in some of these fields. Much of my thinking had been stimulated by thinking about successful works of social representation, particularly beyond the disciplinary fences of social science, and I wanted my results to embody and emphasize that.

Cross-tabulating kinds of media (films, plays, tables, models, and all the rest) by kinds of analytic problems (what is the division of labor between makers and users of representations, for instance) would generate a very large collection of combinations to write about. That kind of classificatory structure underlies what I've done, but I didn't want to feel obligated to fill in all those descriptive and analytic boxes. Nor did I think that such an encyclopedic approach would be useful for my purpose, which I began to see as opening my own eyes, and those of others in the fields I was interested in (which by now went beyond social science), to a larger realm of representational possibilities.

I took a different approach, heavily influenced by my experience of and experiments with hypertext, in which many textual fragments can be read in a variety of orders, sometimes in any order the user chooses. The parts are dependent on one another but not so much that a given order is obligatory. In this spirit, the book has two parts: "Ideas" consists of short essays on general topics that become clearer when seen as aspects of representational worlds. "Examples" contains a number of appreciations and analyses of specific works or bodies of work, or kinds of representations that took on new meaning for me when I saw them in the light of the general ideas. Pieces in the two sections refer to one another, and I mean the whole to look more like a network of thoughts and examples than a linear argument. This approach perhaps best suits a computer, which makes it so easy for a reader to move from topic to topic, but here you have it in a printed book. Sorry about that.

So you can, and should, read the material in these two sections in any order that suits you, within and between sections. The parts are meant both to stand alone and to illuminate each other. The full meaning results from the way you knit the pieces together for your

own purposes, whatever they are. If this works as I hope it will, social scientists and artists with documentary interests will both find something they can use.

Chicago, 1985—San Francisco, 2006

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## Acknowledgments

This project began in the 1980s, when my colleagues at Northwestern University (notably Andrew C. Gordon) and I received a grant from the now defunct System Development Foundation to study “Modes of Representation of Society.” This vague title was meant to encompass our various interests in photography, statistical graphics, theater, and almost any other medium anyone had ever used to tell others what they thought they knew about society. A number of people worked with us over several years, but we never produced the enormous report such a pompous title called for. I wrote a paper (which appears here in somewhat altered form in some of the chapters), and some other people wrote things too; we all wrote a mountain of memos; in the end we went our separate ways, and that seemed to be the end of it, the lack of a big book apparently justifying the gloomy prediction of one of the foundation’s board members that nothing would come of this grant.

Sometime in the mid to late 1990s, I got interested in these questions again, and I taught a seminar—“Telling About Society”—in the spring of 1997, when I was a visitor in the Sociology Department of the University of California–Santa Barbara, and the following year at the University of Washington. Both classes stimulated my thinking about the topic. I wrote myself long memos after every class, which, in various transformations, have found their way into this book. I can’t remember which class stimulated which ideas, so in what follows I refer to “the seminar” when I want to tell about something that happened in one or the other of those classes. The students in both were



an adventurous bunch who were willing to waste a quarter on something that had no apparent professional utility, and I thank all of them for their rambunctious and argumentative participation, chief among the things that led me to write all those memos.

I won't try to list all the people whose conversation and example have influenced me these many years; it's too hard to remember, I'm sure to leave people out, and they know or can guess who they are. Dianne Hagaman helped in all the ways anyone could imagine and also, what people who don't know her might not think of, with her tremendous expertise, born of years of loving study, in the field of Jane Austen and *Pride and Prejudice* (I wouldn't have dared chapter 14 without her help).

Over the years, I have written a number of pieces for presentation and publication here and there, and I have used some of them, mostly transformed quite a bit, in parts of this book. The following appear, in whole or in part, in various chapters:

"Telling About Society," in Howard S. Becker, *Doing Things Together* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1986), 121-36: chapter 1.

"Categories and Comparisons: How We Find Meaning in Photographs," *Visual Anthropology Review* 14 (1998-1999): 3-10: chapter 3.

"Aesthetics and Truth," in Howard S. Becker, *Doing Things Together* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1986), 293-301: chapter 7.

"Visual Sociology, Documentary Photography, and Photojournalism: It's (Almost) All a Matter of Context," *Visual Sociology* 10 (1995): 5-14: chapter 11.

"La politique de la présentation: Goffman et les institutions totales," in *Erving Goffman et les institutions totales*, edited by Charles Amourous and Alain Blanc, 59-77 (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2001); and, in English, as "The Politics of Presentation: Goffman and Total Institutions," *Symbolic Interaction* 26 (2003): 659-69: chapter 13.

"Sociologie, sociographie, Percec, and Passeron," in *Le Goût de l'enquête: Pour Jean-Claude Passeron*, edited by Jean-Louis Fabiani, 289-311 (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2001); a shorter version appears in English as "Georges Percec's Experiments in Social Description," *Ethnography* 2 (2001): 63-76: chapter 15.

"Calvino, sociologue Urbain," in Howard S. Becker, *Paroles et musique* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2003), 73-89: chapter 16.

**Part I : Ideas**

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## Telling About Society

I have lived for many years in San Francisco, on the lower slope of Russian Hill or in the upper reaches of North Beach; how I describe it depends on whom I am trying to impress. I live near Fisherman's Wharf, on the route many people take from that tourist attraction to their motel downtown or on Lombard Street's motel row. Looking out my front window, I often see small groups of tourists standing, alternately looking at their maps and at the large hills that stand between them and where they want to be. It's clear what has happened. The map's straight line looked like a nice walk through a residential neighborhood, one that might show them how the natives live. Now they are thinking, as a young Briton I offered to help said to me, "I've got to get to my motel and I am *not* climbing that bloody hill!"

Why don't the maps those people consult alert them to the hills? Cartographers know how to indicate hills, so it is not a restriction of the medium that inconveniences walkers. But the maps are made for motorists, originally (though no longer) paid for by gasoline companies and tire manufacturers, and distributed through service stations (Paumgarten 2006, 92)—and drivers worry less than pedestrians do about hills.

Those maps, and the networks of people and organizations who make and use them, exemplify a more general problem. An ordinary street map of San Francisco is a conventionalized representation of that urban society: a visual description of its streets and landmarks and of their arrangement in space. Social scientists and ordinary citizens routinely use not only maps but also a great variety of other rep-

resentations of social reality—a few random examples are documentary films, statistical tables, and the stories people tell one another to explain who they are and what they are doing. All of them, like the maps, give a picture that is only partial but nevertheless adequate for some purpose. All of them arise in organizational settings, which constrain what can be done and define the purposes the work will have to satisfy. This understanding suggests several interesting problems: How do the needs and practices of organizations shape our descriptions and analyses (call them representations) of social reality? How do the people who use those representations come to define them as adequate? Such questions have a bearing on traditional questions about knowing and telling in science but go beyond them to include problems more traditionally associated with the arts and with the experience and analysis of everyday life.

For many years, I've been involved with a variety of ways of telling about society, professionally and out of native curiosity. I'm a sociologist, so the ways of telling that come most immediately to my mind are the ones sociologists routinely use: ethnographic description, theoretical discourse, statistical tables (and such visual representations of numbers as bar charts), historical narrative, and so on. But many years ago I went to art school and became a photographer, and in the process I developed a strong and lasting interest in photographic representations of society, which documentary and other photographers have been making since the invention of the medium. That led quite naturally to thinking about film as still another way of telling about society. And not just documentary films but fiction films as well. I'd been an avid reader of fiction since I was a kid, and like most other readers of stories, I knew that they are not just made-up fantasies, that they often contain observations worth reading about how society is constructed and works. Why not dramatic representations of stories on the stage too? Having always been interested and involved in all these ways of telling about society, I decided to take advantage of the somewhat haphazard and random collection of examples that had deposited in my brain.

To do what? To see the problems anyone who tries to do the job of representing society has to solve, what kinds of solutions have been

found and tried, and with what results. To see what the problems of different media have in common and how solutions that work for one kind of telling look when you try them on some other kind. To see what, for instance, statistical tables have in common with documentary photographic projects, what mathematical models have in common with avant-garde fiction. To see what solutions to the problem of description one field might import from another.

So I'm interested in novels, statistics, histories, ethnographies, photographs, films, and any other way people have tried to tell others what they know about their society or some other society that interests them. I'll call the products of all this activity in all these media "reports about society" or, sometimes, "representations of society." What problems and issues arise in making those reports, in whatever medium? I've constructed a list of those issues from the things people who do this kind of work talk and complain about to each other, using as a basic principle of discovery this idea: if it's a problem in one way of making representations, it's a problem in every way of doing so. But the people who work in one area may have solved that problem to their own satisfaction, so that they don't even think of it as a problem, while for other people it seems an insoluble dilemma. Which means that the latter can learn something from the former.

I've been inclusive in making these comparisons, encompassing (at least in principle) every medium and genre people use or have ever used. Of course, I haven't talked about everything. But I have tried to avoid the most obvious conventional biases and have considered, in addition to reputable scientific formats and those invented and used by professionals in recognized scientific disciplines, those used by artists and laypeople as well. A list will suggest this range of topics: from the social sciences, such modes of representation as mathematical models, statistical tables and graphs, maps, ethnographic prose, and historical narrative; from the arts, novels, films, still photographs, and drama; from the large shadowy area in between, life histories and other biographical and autobiographical materials, reportage (including the mixed genres of docudrama, documentary film, and fictionalized fact), and the storytelling, mapmaking, and other representational activities of laypeople (or people acting in a lay capacity, as even professionals do most of the time).

## Who Tells?

We are all curious about the society we live in. We need to know, on the most routine basis and in the most ordinary way, how our society works. What rules govern the organizations we participate in? What routine patterns of behavior do others engage in? Knowing these things, we can organize our own behavior, learn what we want, how to get it, what it will cost, what opportunities of action various situations offer us.

Where do we learn this stuff? Most immediately, from our experience of daily living. We interact with all sorts of people and groups and organizations. We talk to people of all kinds in all kinds of situations. Of course, not all kinds: everyone's social experience of that face-to-face kind is limited by their social connections, their situation in society, their economic resources, their geographical location. You can get by with that limited knowledge, but in modern societies (probably in all societies) we need to know more than what we learn from personal experience. We need, or at least want, to know about other people and places, other situations, other times, other ways of life, other possibilities, other opportunities.

So we look for "representations of society," in which other people tell us about all those situations and places and times we don't know firsthand but would like to know about. With the additional information, we can make more complex plans and react in a more complex way to our own immediate life situations.

Simply put, a "representation of society" is something someone tells us about some aspect of social life. That definition covers a lot of territory. At one extreme lie the ordinary representations we make for one another, as lay folks, in the course of daily life. Take mapmaking. In many situations and for many purposes, this is a highly professionalized activity based on centuries of combined practical experience, mathematical reasoning, and scientific scholarship. But in many other situations, it's an ordinary activity we all do once in a while. I ask you to visit me sometime, but you don't know how to drive to where I live. I can give you verbal directions: "Coming from Berkeley, you take the first exit on the right off the Bay Bridge, turn left at the bottom of the ramp, go several blocks and turn left on to Sacramento, keep

going until you hit Kearny, turn right and go up to Columbus . . ." I can suggest you consult a standard street map along with my directions, or I can just tell you that I live near the intersection of Lombard and Jones and let you use the map to find that spot. Or I can draw my own little map, personalized for you. I can show where you would start from—"your house"—and draw in the relevant streets, indicating where you should turn, how long each leg will be, what landmarks you will pass, and how you will know when you reach "my house." These days an Internet site will tell you all that, or you can let your GPS device do it for you.

Those are all representations of a portion of society, contained in a simple geographical relationship; a simpler and better way of saying it is that these are all ways of telling about society or some portion thereof. Some of the ways, the standard automobile map or the computer description, are made by highly trained professionals using a lot of specialized equipment and knowledge. The verbal description and the homemade map are made by people just like the people to whom they are given, people who have no more geographical knowledge or ability than any ordinarily competent adult. They all work, in different ways, to do the job of leading someone from one place to another.

My own professional colleagues—sociologists and other social scientists—like to talk as though they have a monopoly on creating such representations, as though the knowledge of society they produce is the only "real" knowledge about that subject. That's not true. And they like to make the equally silly claim that the ways they have of telling about society are the best ways to do that job or the only way it can be done properly, or that their ways of doing the job guard against all sorts of terrible mistakes we would otherwise make.

That kind of talk is just a standard professional power grab. Considering the ways that people who work in other fields—visual artists, novelists, playwrights, photographers, and filmmakers—as well as laypeople represent society will show analytic dimensions and possibilities that social science has often ignored that might otherwise be useful. I will concentrate on the representational work done by other kinds of workers, as well as that done by social scientists. Social sci-

entists know how to do their job, and that's adequate for many purposes. But their ways aren't the only ways.

What are some of the other ways? We can categorize representational activities in many ways. We could talk about media—film vs. words vs. numbers, for instance. We might talk about the intent of the makers of the representations: science vs. art vs. reportage. Such a comprehensive review would serve many purposes well, but not my purpose of exploring generic problems of representation and the variety of solutions the world has so far produced. Looking at some major, highly organized ways of telling about society means attending to the distinctions among science, art, and reportage. Those are not so much distinct ways of doing something as they are ways of organizing what might be, from the point of view of materials and methods, pretty much the same activity. (Later, in chapter 11, I'll compare three ways of using still photographs to do those three kinds of work, seeing how the same photographs might be art, journalism, or social science.)

Telling about society usually involves an interpretive community, an organization of people who routinely make standardized representations of a particular kind ("makers") for others ("users") who routinely use them for standardized purposes. The makers and users have adapted what they do to what the others do, so that the organization of making and using is, at least for a while, a stable unity, a *world* (used in a technical sense. I've developed elsewhere [Becker 1982], and will discuss more fully below).

Often enough, some people don't fit well into these organized worlds of makers and users. These experimenters and innovators don't do things as they are usually done, and therefore their works may not have many users. But their solutions to standard problems tell us a lot and open our eyes to possibilities more conventional practice doesn't see. Interpretive communities often borrow procedures and forms, using them to do something the originators in that other community never thought of or intended, producing mixtures of method and style to fit into changing conditions in the larger organizations they belong to.

This is all very abstract. Here's a more specific list of standard for-

mats for telling about society, which have produced exemplary works of social representation worth inspecting carefully:

*Fiction.* Works of fiction, novels and stories, have often served as vehicles of social analysis. The sagas of families, classes, and professional groups by writers as dissimilar in aims and talent as Honoré de Balzac, Émile Zola, Thomas Mann, C. P. Snow, and Anthony Powell have always been understood to embody, and to depend on for their power and aesthetic virtues, complex descriptions of social life and its constituent processes. The works of Charles Dickens, taken singly and as a whole, have been understood (as he intended them to be) as a way of describing to a large public the organizations that produced the ills his society suffered from.

*Drama.* Similarly, the theater has often been a vehicle for the exploration of social life, most especially the description and analysis of social ills. George Bernard Shaw used the dramatic form to embody his understanding of how “social problems” came about and how deeply they penetrated the body politic. His *Mrs. Warren’s Profession* explains the workings of the business of prostitution as it provided the livelihood of at least some of the British upper classes; and *Major Barbara* did the same for war and munitions making. Many playwrights have used drama for similar purposes (Henrik Ibsen, Arthur Miller, David Mamet).

To say that these works and authors deal in social analysis doesn’t mean that that is “all” they do or that their works are “only” sociology in artistic disguise. Not at all. Their authors have purposes in mind beyond social analysis. But even the most formalist critic should realize that some part of the effect of many works of art depends on their “sociological” content and on the belief of readers and audiences that what these works tell them about society is, in some sense, “true.”

*Films.* In the most obvious case, documentary film—Barbara Koppel’s 1976 *Harlan County, U.S.A.* and Edgar Morin and Jean Rouch’s 1961 *Chronique d’un été* are well known examples—has had as a primary object the description of society, often, but not necessarily overtly,

in a reformist mode, aiming to show viewers what’s wrong with current social arrangements. Fiction films also often mean to analyze and comment on the societies they present, many times those in which they are made. Examples range from Gillo Pontecorvo’s pseudodocumentary *Battle of Algiers* (1966) to classic Hollywood fare like Elia Kazan’s 1947 *Gentleman’s Agreement*.

*Photographs.* Likewise, still photographers have, from the beginnings of the genre, often occupied themselves with social analysis. A well-defined genre of documentary photography has had a long and illustrious history. Some exemplary works of that genre include Brassai’s *The Secret Paris of the ’30s* (1976), Walker Evans’s *American Photographs* ([1938] 1975), and Robert Frank’s *The Americans* ([1959] 1969).

So far I have talked about “artistic” modes of making representations of society. Other representations are more associated with “science.”

*Maps.* Maps, associated with the discipline of geography (more specifically, cartography), are an efficient way of displaying large amounts of information about social units considered in their spatial dimension.

*Tables.* The invention of the statistical table in the eighteenth century made it possible to summarize vast numbers of specific observations in a compact and comparable format. These compact descriptions help governments and others organize purposeful social action. A governmental census is the classical form of such use. Scientists use tables to display data others can use to evaluate their theories. Twentieth-century social scientists became increasingly dependent on the tabular display of quantitative data gathered specifically for that purpose.

*Mathematical models.* Some social scientists have described social life by reducing it to abstract entities displayed as mathematical models. These models, intentionally removed from social reality, can convey basic relations characteristic of social life. They have been

used to analyze such varied social phenomena as kinship systems and the world of commercial popular music.

*Ethnography.* A classic form of social description has been the ethnography, a detailed verbal description of the way of life, considered in its entirety, of some social unit, archetypically but not necessarily a small tribal group. The method came to be applied, and is widely applied now, to organizations of all kinds: schools, factories, urban neighborhoods, hospitals, and social movements.

Somewhere between the extremes of art and science lie history and biography, usually devoted to detailed and accurate accounts of past events but often equally given to evaluating large generalizations about matters the other social sciences deal with. (Remember that all of today's sociological reports will be raw material for historians of the future, as masterworks of sociology like the Lynds' studies of "Middletown" have turned from social analysis into historical document.)

Finally, there are the sports, mavericks, and innovators I spoke of earlier. Some makers of representations of society mix methods and genres, experiment with forms and languages, and provide analyses of social phenomena in places we don't expect them and in forms we don't recognize as either art or science or that we see as some unusual and unfamiliar mixture of genres. So Hans Haacke, who can be called a conceptual artist, uses uncomplicated devices to lead users to unexpected conclusions. Georges Perec and Italo Calvino, members of the French literary group OULIPO (Motte 1998) devoted to esoteric literary experiments, made the novel, in one form or another, a vehicle for subtle sociological thinking. And in David Antin's "talk pieces," stories that may or may not be fictions convey complex social analyses and ideas. Like all such experiments, the work of these artists forces us to reconsider procedures we usually take for granted, and I'll discuss their work at length later in the book.

## Facts

I must make an important distinction, even though it is fallacious and misleading and every word involved is slippery and indeterminate. I

don't think those faults make much difference for my purpose here. It's the distinction between "fact" and "idea" (or "interpretation"). One part of any report on society (of any of the kinds I've just outlined) is a description of how things are: how some kinds of things are, in some place, at some time. This is how many people there are in the United States, as counted in the year 2000 by the U.S. Bureau of the Census. This is how many of them are women and how many are men. This is the age distribution of that population—so many below five, so many aged five to ten, all the way up. This is the racial composition of that population. This is the distribution of their incomes. This is that income distribution in racial and gender subgroups of the population.

Those are facts about the U.S. population (and, of course, similar facts are more or less available for all the other countries in the world). They are descriptions of what a person who went looking for such numbers would find, the evidence that results from the operations demographers and statisticians have undertaken in accordance with the procedures of their craft.

In the same way, anthropologists tell us, for instance, how *these* people living in *this* society reckon kinship: they recognize these categories of familial relationship and think this is how people related in those ways should behave toward one another; these are, in the classical phrase, their mutual rights and obligations. Anthropologists support their analyses with accounts of the facts about how those people talk and behave, contained in the field notes that report their on-the-spot observations and interviews, just as demographers support descriptions of the U.S. population with the data produced by the census. In either case, the professionals begin with evidence gathered in ways their craft peers recognize as sufficient to warrant the factual status of the results.

Now for the caveats. Thomas Kuhn long ago persuaded me that facts are never just facts but are rather, as he said, "theory-laden" (1970). Every statement of a fact presupposes a theory that explains what entities are out there to describe, what characteristics they can have, which of those characteristics can be observed and which can only be inferred from characteristics that are observable, and so on.

Theories often seem so obvious as to be self-evident. Does anyone

need to argue that you can tell a human being when you see one and distinguish such a being from some other kind of animal? Does it need arguing that these human beings can be characterized as male or female? Or as black, white, Asian, or of another racial variety?

In fact, scientists and laypeople argue about things like that all the time, as the continually shifting racial categories in censuses all over the world make clear. Characteristics like gender and race don't appear in nature in an obvious way. Every society has ways of telling boys from girls and distinguishing members of racial categories its members think are important from one another. But these categories rest on theories about the essential characteristics of humans, and the nature of the categories and the methods of assigning people to them vary between societies. So we can never take facts for granted. There are no pure facts, only "facts" that take on meaning from an underlying theory.

Moreover, facts are facts only when they are accepted as such by the people to whom those facts are relevant. Am I indulging in a pernicious kind of relativism, or malicious wordplay? Maybe, but I don't think we have to discuss whether there is an ultimate reality science will eventually reveal in order to recognize that reasonable people, including reasonable scientists, often disagree on what constitutes a fact, and when a fact really is a fact. Those disagreements arise because scientists often disagree on what constitutes adequate evidence for the existence of a fact. Bruno Latour (1987, 23–29) has demonstrated, well enough to suit me and many others, that, as he so neatly puts it, the fate of a scientific finding lies in the hands of those who take it up afterward. If they accept it as fact, it will be treated as fact. Does that mean that any damn thing can be a fact? No, because one of the "actants," to use Latour's inelegant expression, that must agree with the interpretation is the object about which the statements of fact are made. I can say the moon is made of green cheese, but the moon will have to cooperate, exhibiting those characteristics that other people will recognize as green cheese-like, or else my fact will become an unacceptable nonfact. Worse yet, my fact may not even be disputed; it may just be ignored, so that you might say it doesn't exist at all, at

least not in the discourse of scientists who study the moon. There may be an ultimate reality, but we are all fallible human beings and may be wrong, so all facts are disputable in the real world we live in. That fact is at least as obdurate and hard to talk away as any other scientific fact.

Finally, facts are not accepted in general or by the world at large, they are accepted or rejected by the particular audiences their proponents present them to. Does this mean science is situational and its findings therefore not universally true? I'm not taking a position on such ultimate questions of epistemology, just recognizing what's obvious: when we make a report about society, we make it to somebody, and who those somebodies are affects how we present what we know and how users react to what we present to them. Audiences differ—this is important—in what they know and know how to do, in what they believe and will accept, on faith or with evidence of some kind. Different kinds of reports routinely go to different kinds of audiences: statistical tables to people more or less trained to read them, mathematical models to people with highly specialized training in the relevant disciplines, photographs to a wide variety of lay and professional audiences, and so on.

Instead of facts supported by evidence that makes them acceptable as fact, then, we have facts based on a theory, accepted by some people because they have been gathered in a way acceptable to some community of makers and users.

### Interpretations

It's not easy to separate interpretations from facts. Every fact, in its social context, implies and invites interpretations. People move easily and without much thought from one to the other. The same facts will support many interpretations. To say, to take a provocative example, that racial groups differ in IQ scores might well be a fact—that is, demonstrated by the use of tests commonly used by psychologists who make a business of such measurement. But to interpret such a finding as a demonstration that such differences are genetic—*inherited* and thus not easily changed—is not a fact, it's an interpretation



of the meaning of the reported fact. An alternate interpretation says the fact demonstrates that the IQ test is culture specific and can't be used to compare different populations.

Neither do the findings about race, gender, and income we can find in the U.S. Census speak for themselves. Someone speaks for them, interpreting their meaning. People argue more about interpretations than they do about facts. We can agree on the numbers describing the relations between gender, race, and income, but the same census data might be interpreted to show the existence of discrimination, the lessening of discrimination, the joint working of two disadvantaged conditions (being female, being black) on income, or many other possible stories.

A report about society, then, is an artifact consisting of statements of fact, based on evidence acceptable to some audience, and interpretations of those facts similarly acceptable to some audience.

## 2

### Representations of Society as Organizational Products

People who gather facts about society and interpret them don't start from scratch every time they report. They use forms, methods, and ideas that some social group, large or small, already has available as a way of doing that job.

Reports on society (remember that *representation* and *report* refer to the same thing) make most sense when you see them in organizational context, as activities, as ways some people tell what they think they know to other people who want to know it, as organized activities shaped by the joint efforts of everyone involved. It's a confusing error to focus on nouns rather than verbs, on the objects rather than the activities, as though we were investigating tables or charts or ethnographies or movies. It makes more sense to see those artifacts as the frozen remains of collective action, brought to life whenever someone uses them—as people's making and reading charts or prose, making and seeing films. We should understand the expression *a film* as shorthand for the activity of "making a film" or "seeing a film."

That's a distinction with a difference. Concentrating on the object misdirects our attention to the formal and technical capabilities of a medium: how many bits of information a television monitor with a particular degree of resolution can convey, or whether a purely visual medium can communicate such logical notions as causality. Concentrating on organized activity, on the other hand, shows that what a medium can do is always a function of the way organizational constraints affect its use. What photographs can convey depends in part on the budget of the photographic project, which limits how many