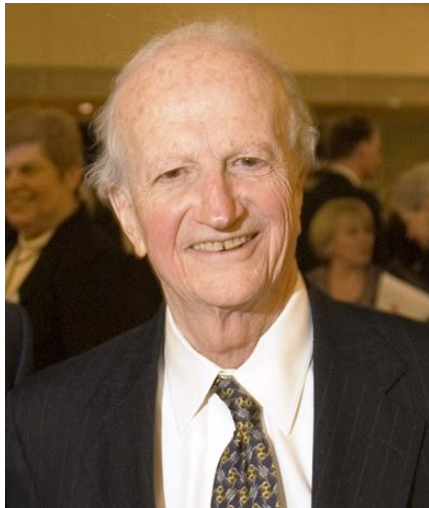


INTERVIEW

An interview with Gary Becker: “I think it is a Good Idea to do Economic Sociology” (English Version of the Interview)¹



Gary BECKER— is Winner of the 1992 Nobel Prize for Economics. He was a President of the American Economic Association (1987) and the Western Economic Association (1996-1997). In 2007 Prof Becker was awarded the highest civilian award in the USA, Presidential Medal of Freedom. Being a senior student at Princeton he contemplated transferring to sociology, but “found that subject too difficult (Becker 1993). He is an author and co-author of 14 books. The recent Becker’s books are “Uncommon Sense” [Becker, Posner 2009] and “Social Economics” [Becker, Murphy 2001]. Becker was a columnist for Business Week (1985-2004). Since 2004 he and a Senior Lecturer in Law at the University of Chicago, a judge on the United States Court of Appeals for the Seventh Circuit in Chicago Richard Posner blogging² on the regular base. The blog is the most cited resource among economists who blogging too [Mixon, Upadhyaya 2010].

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—*You are one of the most cited and criticized economist among sociologists. Your pioneering works in which you apply economic logics to study social phenomena, some are delighted, others – plunged into depression. How would you define the limits of economic approach in investigating social life or are there no limits?*

—There are limits. I don’t know what limits are. The only one way you can discover limits is to keep trying and see it works or not. When you look at the areas where kind of economic type reasoning had been successful in sociology, there are many of them, like fertility, population, marriage problems.

My book on the family [Becker 1981] which was heavily criticized by some sociologists, nevertheless, there’s a survey done more than 20 years ago, in the last thirty years it was one of like fifteen best-selling book in sociology. So, sociologists had been interested in it (*laughing*). Economist now can something add to discussion of social interaction and other problems. I am not thinking it is a replacing of what sociologists can do but adding a lot to what sociologists do.

My former colleague, who died in 1995, James Coleman, was one of the leading sociologists who developed an important area – rational choice sociology. It brings to be a lot of mind tools like game theory and economic type reasoning, and I think sociologists should be much

¹ First published in Russian: Krylov D., Loginov G. 2010. “I think it is a Good Idea to do Economic Sociology”. An Interview with Gary Becker. *Economic Sociology*. 11 (2): 8-12.

² <http://uchicagolaw.typepad.com/beckerposner/>. – Hereinafter notes made by DK & GL.

more able to use these tools to attack some social questions.

But the problem is most sociologists are badly trained in modern tools of analysis. If you look at the way sociology theory is taught in most places in the United States and Europe, it is taught about who is the main sociologist: Durkheim or Comte, Weber or Parsons, and others great names. That is not a way to teach theory, it should be some theory that you are teaching. And it is not true to sociology. Sociologists are undertrained; they should have more skills, not only economic skills but also statistical, method skills.

Because a lot of sociologists are undertrained a lot of works on social questions has been done by economists, whereas traditionally only sociologists work was done. I can give you many examples when economists work on social interactions. And there is significantly growing literature in economics on those questions, and sociologists still are interested in and still discuss. By gaining economic training, economists have better tools. Sociology has to get over this view started from Durkheim and others hostility to economics, bring in some economics in merger with the insight of sociology. Otherwise I think sociology is going to progress slowly.

—A lot of economists ignore sociology, in investigation of which economic issues could sociology help?

—So called social interactions type of issues. For example, what is the influence on the neighborhood on committing crime by other people, to take drugs or to smoke and other important social issues, which economists for long time neglected and sociologists investigated. Economists have a lot to learn from sociologists. There would be a set of issues, for example, fertility issues. Demographers in the sociology departments made an important contribution understanding issues, measuring, introducing concepts and economists had learned from sociologists from this area, as well as from other areas.

There is two-way learning. For example, I am entitled professor of sociology at Chicago along with economist³. I have learned a lot from sociology over the years, and I think it is a two-way street. And younger economists and some older economists quite quote some sociology references as well as economic references.

Another example. Sociology started much earlier than economists going out collecting data to discuss questions. They conduct interviews about what people are doing and why they are doing it, economists did not do this work until recently. But now they do it, and do it well, probably with better technical skills than sociologists. But certainly sociologists get that much earlier. I think that economists have learned and continue learning from sociologists from sight, not just taking library data, but actually go out and collect your own data.

—What do you think about the field of economic sociology, which tries to combine strong sides of both economics and sociology?

—It's very limited, because mainly not many people are trying to do it. There are certain schools and certain places in the world where few people do it: in the Netherlands there are one or two universities that do it, one or two in Germany, not too many in the United States. I think I am the only economist who has an appointment in the sociology department in the U.S., maybe not the only one but certainly one within the major departments.

It is a very small field. There is a pretty small section of the American Sociological Association called "Economic Sociology". But I think it is a good idea to do it, to gain the techniques in both fields, but still

³ "In 1983, the Sociology Department at Chicago offered me a joint appointment. I was happy to accept because this was an outstanding department. Its invitation to me gave a signal to the sociology profession that the rational choice approach was a respectable theoretical paradigm" [Becker 1993].

pretty small. It doesn't have a big influence on sociology. I think James Coleman had a big influence and a few others sociologists of that type of training had a big influence. With Coleman's death nobody of equal status has come along in this field.

—*Could you name a sociologist who had intellectual influence on you?*

—The most important is Coleman. We were good friends, we ran a seminar together, rational choice in the social sciences, which was very widespread, we had people from all fields attending and speaking in that. From listening to Coleman, listening other speakers, I learned quite a bit about sociology more than from any other person. There are others sociologists I admire, like Robert Merton, in particular. And I could mention other names but if you are asking me from who I learned most, I would name you Coleman.

—*In 1967 you won the John Bates Clark Medal⁴. When did you realize that you could be awarded the Nobel Prize?*

—My work was still very criticized. I won the Clark medal; it was a big honor for a young economist, the biggest honor from the American Economic Association. Still a lot of people were very much opposed to my work if you look at places like MIT, Harvard or Stanford and other most major economic departments in the U.S. and even more so in Europe and elsewhere they were opposed to the things I was doing.

When the Nobel Prize started in 1969 I had no idea that I could win it. Eventually, in 1980s I began thinking that may be I have pretty good chances to win it, but it took a while before I had that feeling in 1992.

—*You were studying a lot of issues about the labor market. If we concentrate on foreign school and college graduates who try to attend to the American universities for making bachelor, magister or PhD programs, what do you think about their chance to attend American universities because of the current crisis?*

—We should be happy to get them if they have qualifications and they admitted because some one of them will stay here, and it is good part of human capital for us. Others would go back and would help their own countries, and it is fine for us too.

The only groups we have to be concerned about are potential terrorist groups from some countries. Some of the Islamic countries are willing not to let their graduates come here, particularly if students go into the sensitive areas like nuclear physics and so on, where we have to be a little more careful. But not in the U.S. but also in Russia and a lot of countries terrorism is a real problem. So we have to be more worried about that and if we have to profile by country I support doing that because it is potentially a major threat. But other than that I think we should be encouraging graduate students to come here.

I don't think American universities have any policy, at least if we are speaking about the University of Chicago. We had cut down enrollments, but we do not have any policy to favor Americans over foreign students. Sometimes congressmen say we should but I don't think that major American universities have that policy. And I don't think we should have such policy, we should try to get the best students.

The bigger problem is that we made so difficult often for students to get visas, to come here that a lot of them decided to go to Europe and other places to study. That is a big mistake we got to loosen upon that, except for few sensitive countries.

⁴ Twelve Nobel-winners were awarded with the Jones Bates Clark Medal. That is why people think that the award opens door on the way to the Nobel Prize in economics. Since 2010 the Clark Medal is awarded annually (before it – once in two years).

—You also wrote that you are worried about the anti-immigration rhetoric of the leading members of the U.S. Congress. What are your short-term expectations about the U.S. immigration policy?

— Usually during recession you got tighter immigration laws than looser, and I think they're not going to change much. So it becomes hard for certain people to get jobs in the USA. We should be trying to get a lot of skilled people coming to the United States, who want to come to us, but we put too many obstacles into their working here. For example, companies have to show that they can't hire somebody else from America. That goes against a bad policy but I think they'll continue particularly during recession. We have a feared number of illegal immigrants, we haven't had the will to stop that illegal immigration, we have a number of legal immigrants, I don't think the policies are sensible policies in many dimensions, but I think we'll continue to have that. In the long run I'd like to see the solution to our immigration policies.

Interview made by Dmitry Krylov and Georgy Loginov.

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