

Ernest Becker: An Appreciation of a Life That Began September 27, 1924 and Ended March 6, 1974

Author(s): Irving Louis Horowitz

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NOTES

ERNEST BECKER:

An Appreciation of a Life That Began September 27, 1924
and Ended March 6, 1974

IRVING LOUIS HOROWITZ

Rutgers University

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During the final years of his life Ernest Becker knew death as a handmaiden. Cancer is a condition of permanent biological confrontation in which dying becomes a way of life. Ernest's extraordinary talent was the ability to translate experience into reason, the everyday expression of disaster into a social science expression of tragedy. In this regard, his final work, written and released just prior to the end, *The Denial of Death* (1973), parallels that remarkable personal document by Stewart Alsop, *Stay of Execution* (1974). Becker's final study concerns the meaning of death and not the management of dying. It centers on a universal property that unites the human sciences—the effort to overcome the inevitable. Becker was never content with observation cut asunder from interpretation. This work closes the circle he began in *The Birth and Death of Meaning* (1962). It is right and just that he should have been posthumously awarded a Pulitzer Prize on May 6, 1974.

In a lesser talent, professional marginality dooms a scholar, placing him between the many schools of social science. Becker knew this full well, and willingly ran risks for his integrated science of man, in which Pragmatism, Personalism, Marxism and Freudianism were a four-fold metaphysical table. Although he was trained in cultural anthropology (receiving his doctoral degree from Syracuse University in that subject) he preferred the kind of theorizing favored by an inherited cultural sociology. The *Geisteswissenschaft* of a Dilthey more than the cultural anthropology of a Boas stirred his imagination. *The Struc-*

ture of Evil (1968) rather than the structure of the family or tribe stirred his soul.

Becker claimed as his domain the science of man, while those fragmented, or better, fractured social scientists, simply saw this preference as an occasion to exclude him from their specific domain. Psychiatry at Syracuse University, sociology at the University of California, and social psychology at San Francisco State College cast him loose. His soul finally came to rest at Simon Fraser University, with its special integrated department of political science, anthropology, and sociology. During the final burst of radical energy of the late 1960's, Becker came to a department which, if it did not exactly meet his criteria for an integrated scientific vision of humanity, at least gave him the material sustenance and the critical intellectual mass required for his effort.

I first met Ernest at Syracuse University during the summer of 1961 where I was serving a visiting stint in Paul Meadows' sociology department. It was an interesting and lively group, including S. M. Miller, Blanche Geer, Irwin Deutscher, with many special programs that were later to be of decisive importance in the study of income gaps and national poverty. But the quintessential group of innovators at Syracuse were a peculiar group of social psychiatrists lodged in the medical school, headed by Tom Szasz, Ronald Leifer and Ernest Becker, whose appointment was in the Department of Psychiatry, the State University of New York, Upstate Medical Center, located in Syracuse. This special School of Medicine, rather than any of the

social science or business policy schools, contained the greatest amount of novelty. From this point in time, Ernest evolved his ideas concerning an integrated vision of the science of man. I confess that then, as now, I remain unconvinced by his pragmatized version of overcoming alienation by a return to the *kulturkampf als Geisteswissenschaft* (cf. Becker, 1967). But his intellectual demeanor was so gentle and his passions so deep, that it was hard not to take his effort with the utmost seriousness. For whatever its exact content, Ernest did anticipate by a full decade the current round of intellectual discontent with the fragmentation and frustrations brought about by the previous automatic acceptance of functionalism as a way of social science life.

During this period I had the privilege of knowing Ernest personally, and I learned that he had wit as well as wisdom. His ability to regale a group, in accent and anecdote, was such as to make one wonder why he insisted on such an austere public image. Perhaps he felt that too much light-headedness and levity were already a hallmark of academic affairs, or, as is more likely the case, he simply felt that keen sense of the public and the private—a distinction that many outstanding intellectuals have been forced to live with. In any event, he was an intensely private person; even his cancer illness was known only to a handful. His work, while reflecting a growing interest with the interplay of life and death, showed no traces of self-indulgence or self-pity. His illness became a source of information as well as imagination.

My favorite of his essays was, first, his extraordinary statement on "Mills' Social Psychology and the Great Historical Convergence on the Problem of Alienation," in *The New Sociology* (1964a). It was an outstanding reinterpretation of the idea that mental illness is linked to educational breakdown; specifically, that the Freudian conception of neurosis might best be interpreted as a case of maleducation, or miseducation in the things which are vital to personal survival. As he put the matter in a later work, *Angel in Armor* (1969) "Character armor refers literally to the arming of the personality so that it can maneuver in a threatening world." This approach tied into a Marxian view of consciousness as a precondition for political liberation. This essay formed the basis of his

later work on *The Revolution in Psychiatry* (1964b). I still feel that this represented a far more intriguing effort at synthesis than the eros/thanatos dialectic taken by other left-oriented figures in the early sixties—for it carried the possibility of rebirth and reform within real persons and not just the metaphysical interplay of giant thought systems.

The review-essay Ernest wrote for *Transaction/Society* entitled "Biological Imperialism" (1972) on *The Imperial Animal*, by Lionel Tiger and Robin Fox, was typical of his independent frame of mind. Far from taking the easy road of criticizing the book for its ill-timed male chauvinism (by virtue of its automatic and unfounded assumption that the hunting culture was specifically male dominated, and therefore spilled over into the management and control of the household or the community itself) Becker chose to develop a careful but devastating critique of the biogram model employed by Fox and Tiger. Nonetheless, he was careful to note the values of linking disciplines (from biology to zoology on one side to ethnology and sociology at the other side) in an effort to better understand the historical foundations of sex differentiation as well as all forms of social stratification. This piece was revealing because it showed that the idea of culture, the root and branch of cultural anthropology, remained at the heart of things for Ernest. Even in the integrationist attempt to frame a science of man, his intellectual origins were clearly expressed. Perhaps this is the inevitable consequence of all efforts at synthesis that start from the idea of a special social science, be it anthropology or sociology or economy.

Ernest was not a political radical, certainly not in any common-sense meaning of that term. Never did I hear him offer a tsk-tsk here and a pshaw-pshaw there about the awful truths of life and death as reported in newspapers. Indeed, his earlier background in the U.S. Foreign Service ill-suited him for any sort of political role. But in searching for a scientific synthesis that would amplify experience without violating the complexities of daily living, he attracted the radical sectors of the student body and professorial estate to his classes and causes. From Syracuse, to Berkeley, to Simon Fraser, people sensed a radicalism of content buried beneath a peculiar conservatism of style. This combina-

tion was to become Becker's intellectual badge. Here too, the mosaic of the man was best expressed in his constant search for the roots of twentieth century tragedy: technological growth brought at the price of genocidal destruction. Through this dialectic, Ernest was able to identify with the main movements of his time, against war in Asia, for racial equality in the United States, without the conventional parochialisms that made these movements themselves obsolete in victory. His anguish was the breakdown of synthesis in the present century, and his understanding was that the realization of equity would be the precondition for any renewed effort at universal synthesis—in fact as well as in theory.

Ernest Becker's abilities as a teacher are legendary. Probably not since F. O. Matthiessen has the higher reaches of academia known such a powerful, charismatic teacher. When the department of sociology at the University of California chose not to retain him on a permanent basis (it was said that he was not a professional sociologist), he received the unique honor of a teaching offer from the student body. Ernest became the first teacher chosen by his students directly without administrative support, and paid by them through Student Union funds. Fortunately for Ernest, and perhaps for the Student Union itself (which might have come into a serious jurisdictional dispute with the California Regents over such a disbursement of its funds), he received an interim appointment at San Francisco State, itself in the twilight of its own radicalization.

After arriving at Simon Fraser University one year later, Becker had to choose new sides between radicals fighting their dismissals and other radicals who, because they had been retained, chose not to fight. The issues at Simon Fraser were complex, and the scars deep. Ernest remained outside of this battle; although he tacitly supported the claims of those dismissed. We all want our heroes to be larger than life, to come out at the bell fighting and to do the righteous work of the Lord on every occasion. This was not the case with Ernest. By the time he reached Simon Fraser, the bloom was off the rose of the radical sixties. The issues had become cloudy and interest in student rebellion had waned. In

any event, Ernest had never claimed a radical posture and hence had little compunction about absenting himself from radical campus politics. Shuttlung about in academic life for two decades might also have played a part in dulling his appetites for internecine struggles, especially during a period of sharply failing health. No apologies are called for; yet no false deities should be constructed either. Ernest was man, not superman; humanist scholar, not socialist activist.

To all of us privileged to know Ernest Becker, the loss will be real and great. He well understood the idea of culture as a trans-mission belt, or as he called matters: "stones in the edifice." He knew this both through anthropology and through religion. Immortality for the humanist is rendered in the ongoing tradition of the new, in the people who use and even abuse works of the past. In eight books and countless more articles he set forth the premises of his integrationist view of the social sciences. His efforts to move beyond the positivist critique of meaning into new sources for the discovery of meaning made Ernest a contributor to liberation in that special, some may say vain sense, in which the idea of social science is itself isomorphic with the idea of reason. Whatever the life of reason demanded: action or contemplation, it was the appeal to evidence as an architectonic of knowledge that ultimately renders meaning possible. Ernest was prepared to run his risks as part of such a framework of intellectual redefinition and redemption.

Let me end with one of Ernest's favorite aphorisms (from Pascal). It well expresses the special dialectic of the man. "Deliver me Lord, from the sadness at my own suffering which self-love might give. But put into me a sadness like your own."

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SOCIOLOGY AND THE MASS MEDIA: SOME MAJOR PROBLEMS AND MODEST PROPOSALS *

LAUREL RICHARDSON WALUM

The Ohio State University

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In this research note I wish to discuss three questions: (1) What happens to a sociological paper when it is widely disseminated through the mass media? (2) What is the impact on the author and the profession of the alteration (implied by such publicity) of the normal process of scientific feedback? (3) What policies might sociologists employ to ensure that the public image of sociology has greater fidelity and integrity?

In addressing these questions, I draw upon the case history of one sociology paper which was disseminated widely through the media. I recognize that this case history may be atypical; but nevertheless, I contend that by examining the "extreme," we are often better able to understand the "normal" (cf. Garfinkel, 1967).

Dissemination and Feedback

The first two questions—dissemination and feedback—are questions pertaining to the intervention of the norms of science by the norms of journalism. The typical processing of sociology is the inception of a problem, research, preparation and submission of results, evaluation of them by reviewers, publication (or rejection and resubmittal), citation, replication and, eventually, replacement. Whatever the eventual outcome of the research, however—whether it "grows up" to be footnote or lives only as an item on the author's curriculum vita—the processing of

normal sociology is rather slow. In this processing, the norms of science are activated: communality, universalism, disinterestedness, organized skepticism (Merton, 1968: 119). The work is judged, disseminated, replicated, and challenged by *sociologists*. And in each of these stages of processing, the criteria for evaluation are the criteria of sociology.

What happens, however, when the normal processing of sociological work is altered through the intervention of the normal processes of normal journalism? The abbreviated case history presented here demonstrates some of the processes by which sociology is transformed into journalism and the latent consequences of these transformations for sociology.

Media Processing. At the 1973 Annual Meetings of the American Sociological Association, I presented a paper entitled, "The Door Ceremony." (Walum, 1973) In that paper, I argued that the simple, ceremonial ritual at the door confirms not only self-images but a central cultural value: patriarchy. The paper had also been submitted for publication and had, therefore, been subjected to the normal processing of sociology (Walum, 1974).

During the meetings, a New York Times reporter, Israel Shenker (1973), requested a copy of the paper and an interview. The following day, the completed news story with the banner headline, "Who is first through the door is no open and shut matter," half-page in length with photos of the author and others going through doors, appeared on

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