# CULTURAL HERO SYSTEMS AND RELIGIOUS BELIEFS: THE IDEAL-REAL SOCIAL SCIENCE OF ERNEST BECKER [1]

JOSEPH A. SCIMECCA
*Department of Sociology George Mason University*
*from*

*Ernest Becker formulated a theory of human behavior based on the premise that the fear of death is the motivating principle of human behavior. Becker's "ideal-real" social science combined psychology with a mythico-religious perspective to provide a model that would insure the fullest liberation of man. A social phenomenologist, Becker believed that human beings needed to create a meaningful world. Traditional social science had failed man in that it did not provide the basis for a meaningful existence. Only by embracing a religious perspective could individuals overcome and transcend the crippling fear of death. This paper analyzes Becker's "ideal-real" social science.* [2]

During his lifetime, Ernest Becker failed to receive the recognition he deserved from the academic world. What recognition Becker finally did accrue came from the general public more than from his social science peers. (In the late 1960s, Becker's teaching contract was not renewed at Berkeley because his writings were judged to be "superficial" by his colleagues.) Ironically, the bulk of esteem for Becker's views was accorded to him only when it became known that a social critic who, himself was dying, had written a book on death. Lost in the rush to pay homage to the dying or dead was the fact that Becker had finished *The Denial of Death* (1973) a full year before he knew of the cancer in his body; that this Pulitzer Prize winning work [3] was the outgrowth of themes he had developed in a half-dozen of his previous books. It is these themes which constituted Becker's "ideal-real" social science, a social science that would combine psychology with a mythico-religious perspective in order to provide a model for the fullest liberation of man (1971a: 156). This paper analyzes these themes.

## BECKER'S IDEAL-REAL SOCIAL SCIENCE: THE LOST SCIENCE OF MAN

Ernest Becker's social theory can best be characterized as social phenomenology. He saw man as "the animal in nature who, *par excellence*, imposes symbolic categories of thought on raw experience" (Becker, 1967: 126). Society is a fiction created by individuals, a fiction which enables them to impose meaning on their lives. Social theory in Becker's scheme has a dual task: to understand the fictions man creates and to point the way toward transcending them and insuring freedom. To Becker, there was "no theory about man without a belief in what is proper for man" (Becker, 1967: 126).

Society is a game, a play-form. This is the insight that Huizinga (1955) pointed to in his *Homo Ludens*. It also is an integral part of the social theory of George Simmel, who described man as playing at society. Society is a monumental game and "this game is the living principle of all civilization" (Becker, 1967: 142). In "playing" at society, man

creates a fictional world, a "symbolic universe" as it were, that brings meaning to his life. Social theory, if it is to carry out the promise of the Enlightenment—the hope for a free and autonomous human being—must lead us to an understanding of the importance of our fictional creation and, more importantly, the utter seriousness with which we try to sustain and reinforce this fiction. For as Becker (1971b: 139) wrote:

> The world of human aspiration is largely fictitious and if we do not understand this we understand nothing about man. It is a largely symbolic creation by an ego-controlled animal that permits action in a psychological world, a symbolic-behavioral world removed from the bound-ness of the present moment, from the immediate stimuli which enslave all lower organisms. Man's freedom is a fabricated freedom, and he pays a price for it. He must at all times *defend the utter fragility of his delicately constituted fiction, deny its artificiality*.

It must rank as a truly remarkable intellectual achievement that man has been able to discover the fictional nature of the social world of culture. Culture, as currently constituted, provides the only way man can see himself as a hero within the symbolic fiction. Without his fictions man is reduced to his basic animal existence. This is the fundamental paradox of human existence: unlike other animals, man has an awareness of himself as a unique individual; and on the other hand, man is the only animal who knows that he will die (Becker, 1971a: 141). Man constantly lives with this burden. He must create meaning for himself, yet he knows that any meaning he creates will die with him. The problem of meaninglessness, the heart of this phenomenological position, revolves around what Becker described as "cultural hero-systems"—the channels culture affords the individual for making a secure contribution to the world despite the realization that this contribution is a finite one. Once the social fiction is discredited, the way to triumph over despair is lost. Man creates a tenuous, fragile fiction, but it is the only defense he can muster against the despair that is inherent in the human condition (Becker, 1971b: 142). It is a great price to pay, but it is a price man must be willing to pay if he is to be free. For as Becker (1971b: 121) wrote:

> When we ask what caused things to develop as they are now, how man in society got to be as he is, the only principle must be the principle of human freedom; the only possible synthetic framework must be one that explains differences in human freedom in society and history.

The role of the social science Becker envisioned is clear. Its task is to assess the humanly defeating fictions of the socially created hero-systems. And because it is utopian to the extent that it is partially an "ideal" social science, it must provide directions for establishing meaning and freedom.

> The crisis of middle and upper-class youth in the structure of the Western world is precisely a crisis of belief in the vitality of the hero-systems that are offered by contemporary materialist society. The young no longer feel heroic in doing as their elders did, and that's that . . . our own national hero

systems are themselves suffering the discredit that primitive tribes had suffered earlier; our drop-out youth are the newly detribalized (Becker, 1971b : 126).

The fundamental question that the "ideal-real" social science asks is: what hero-system is best for the individual? Because we are so enmeshed in the fictional reality we create, we can never ask in any ultimate sense what is real. But, perhaps, we can ask what is false. Or, as Becker (1971b: 159) put it, we can ask:

> What is illusionary, what prevents the health, the coping with new problems, the life and survival of a given society? What are its *real possibilities* within the web of fictions in which it is suspended? In any given historical period the task of the social sciences is to see broader and better than the members of a given society what is killing that society from within its own institutions. Giddings' classic program for sociology, rephrased more pointedly, would go like this: "What is the cost in adaptive capacity and freedom to perceive the world, of a given hero-system?"

The task of Becker's social theory is no less than an historical understanding of how certain types of social structures shape certain types of people through generations. [4] And, to understand how this is possible, we must turn to Becker's two major principles of human motivation: the self-esteem maintenance principle and the immortality-striving principle.

## SELF-ESTEEM AND IMMORTALITY-STRIVING

Drawing heavily upon the works of Adler (1964) and Rank (1945, 1958, and 1961), Becker reformulated many of the basic Freudian concepts. According to Becker, the early training of children, for example, is best understood not by the Freudian staple of the Oedipus complex, but through the principle of self-esteem maintenance.

> The whole early training period of the child can be understood in one simple way: it is the period in which he learns to maintain his self-esteem in more-or-less constant fashion by adapting his reactions to the dictates and the possibilities of his human environment. He maintains his self-esteem by avoiding anxiety; and the anxiety comes from his human environment in the form of disapprobation or the threat of separation from the parents. Thus, he maintains his self-esteem precisely by forming himself into the type of person who need not fear disapprobation or the loss of his succoring objects. . . . This means that he becomes human by learning to derive his self-esteem from symbolic performances pleasing to adults rather than from continued physiological dependence, which becomes displeasing to them. The various styles of human character (or life styles) which can result from this early training can be considered as *variations in modes of self-esteem maintenance*. Thus, in the most brief

and direct manner, we have a *law* of human development and its explanatory principle (Becker, 1968: 328).

In short, individuals simply like to feel good about themselves in symbolic and organismic ways. A prime task of social science is to provide "a complete picture of self-esteem maintenance of the individual immersed in his full social milieu" ( Becker, 1968: 335). As pointed out earlier, Becker's social theory provides a built-in ethical imperative by presenting a normative structure that enables us to discuss the ways in which a society fails to provide for the self-esteem needs of its members. The "ideal-real" social science can focus specifically on how societies mitigate against critical awareness by limiting the role flexibility of its members—how societies confine individual actions to shallow, routine, and unconvincing behavior (Becker, 1968: 336). With such a social science, we can begin to understand how the self develops, not only in microcosm, but also in terms of external conditions. We can begin to understand how the individual constantly seeks to avoid anxiety and maintain self-esteem in a socially constructed world.

In his early works, Becker (1967, 1968) held that the principle of self-esteem maintenance was the single principle which could explain human motivation. In his last two books, *The Denial of Death* (1973) and *Escape From Evil* (1975) he came to see the principle of immortality-striving as more encompassing. This principle holds that every individual seeks immortality and identifies with an ideology of self-expression which he believes gives him immortality (Rank, 1945, 1958, 1961). Man, in his attempt to escape his mortality (i.e., to deny the tenuous nature of his existence), creates norms, rituals, and ultimately bureaucracies which order his life. The individual blindly follows the ritualized activities of his daily existence, desperately seeking satisfaction in order to maintain his self-esteem. This is Becker's explanation of why man adapts so well to the bureaucratic "iron cage" that Weber prophetically described; why man so often gives his unquestioning allegiance to the nation-states that have the power to arbitrarily send him to his death. According to Becker (1971b: 185), the individual:

> is part of an objectified structure, an ant doing his small part reflexively in a huge anthill of delegated power and authority. He follows orders, keeps his nose clean, and gets whatever satisfactions his character structure has equipped him to seek. And so the best and most "natural" intentions work the great historical evil that we have seen in our times.

The irony in human existence is that in reaching for his highest needs, self-esteem and immortality, man does so over the flesh and blood of other men. Evil, to Becker, is simply the result of man's narrow and uncritical performance of the social fictions and rituals he has created. With his acceptance of Rank's immortality-striving principle, Becker felt that the truly vicious aspects of human behavior were explainable. The principle of self-esteem maintenance, by itself, did not go far enough. This is why Becker believed that *The Denial of Death* was his first mature work. The motivating principle of human behavior is the fear of death. To alleviate this fear, man attributes a supernatural nature to culture: it provides the mechanism for his perpetuation and redemption. This is why man's aggressiveness is so much greater than that of other animals. Man, alone, is

conscious of death and constantly engages in a heightened search for self-perpetuation. This even leads him to kill others to affirm his own life.

> It is obvious that man kills to *cleanse* the earth of tainted ones; and that is what victory means and how it commemorates his life and power: man is bloodthirsty to ward off the flow of his own blood. And it seems further, out of the war experiences of recent times, when man sees that he is trapped and excluded from longer earthly duration, he says, "If I can't have it, then neither can you" (Becker, 1975: 111).

Thus, history can be read as the chronicle of people working out their problems on others, whether it be on an individual basis or the level of the nation-state with its awesome stock of weapons. Man, because he is powerless over death, must repress his anxiety. And so,

> he frantically drives himself to see his effects, to convince himself and others that he really counts. This alone is enough to cause evil all by itself; an energetic organism with personal anxieties about his powers (Becker, 1975: 136).

Evil ultimately lies in the driving personal motive behind man's tragic need for heroic victory over death. The over-riding concern of human existence is the manner by which a mortal animal who is conscious of this mortality seeks to fashion a meaningful existence. Becker saw his human concern doomed to failure. To Becker, only by embracing a religious perspective, by turning to God, could man live a truly meaningful life. Therefore, to fully understand Becker's insistence on the primacy of immortality striving, the religious aspects of human existence must be analyzed.

## FEAR OF DEATH AND RELIGIOUS BELIEFS

Briefly stated, Becker's thesis is that death is the primary repression. Man possesses no innate instincts of sexuality, or even of aggression. Society is built upon the repression of the thought of death. Its primary purpose is to enable the child to meet the terror of life and loneliness, first by asserting his omnipotence, and then when the limitations of this endeavor are seen, by identifying the culture as the vehicle for immortality. Power, too, can be explained by the immortality-striving principle. Individuals always have been fascinated with those who hold power, and as members of groups, they can identify with the hero-leader who enables them to overcome the loneliness, the smallness that they feel. This identification process can explain, too, how we rush to name airports, stadiums, streets, after our dead heroes. It is as though we want "to declare that he will be immortalized physically in the society, in spite of his physical death" (Becker, 1973: 149). When the leader dies, it is a stark reminder to us of the terror of our own death. If one who was so powerful can be brought down, what chance do we ordinary mortals have? And when the slain leader is young and vital, as was John F. Kennedy, the starkness of our own mortality is even more apparent. Did we weep for President Kennedy as we sat glued to our television sets, or did we weep for ourselves? Becker's

answers to these questions are obvious. We transfer our immortality-striving to another person because:

> We don't know, on this planet, what the universe wants from us or is prepared to give us. We don't have an answer to the question that troubled Kant of what our duty is, what we should be doing on earth. We live in utter darkness about who we are and why we are here, yet we know it must have some meaning. What is more natural, then, that to take this unspeakable mystery and dispel it straightaway by addressing our performance of heroics to another human being, knowing thus daily whether the performance is good enough to earn us immortality (Becker, 1973 : 156).

Human beings have a need for hope, for meaning, and these needs make us reach out for something that makes life worthwhile. Becker's "ideal-real" social science can be used not only to analyze what makes life meaningful, but to offer choices based on this analysis. Becker (1971b: 186) offered four levels of meaning that an individual could choose to live by:

1. The first, most intimate, basic level, is what we could call the Personal one. It is the level of what one is oneself, his "true" self, his special gift or talent, what he feels to himself to be deep down inside, the person he talks to when he is alone, the secret hero of his inner scenario.
2. The second, or next highest level we could call the Social. It represents the most intimate extension of oneself to a select few intimate others: one's spouse, his friends, his relatives, perhaps even his pets.
3. The third and next highest level we could call the Secular. It consists of symbols of allegiance at a greater personal distance and often higher in power and compellingness: the corporation, the party, the nation, science, history, humanity.
4. The fourth and highest level of power and meaning we would call the Sacred: It is the invisible and unknown level of power, the insides of nature, the source of creation, God.

Becker (1971b: 188-189) opted for the fourth choice, claiming that true heroism could only be cosmic.

> By serving the highest power you serve the best power, not any second rate one; by linking your destiny to that of creation you give it its proper fulfillment, its proper dignity, its only genuine nobility. Not only that, but you take the problem of your authentic talent and solve it even if you are not lucky enough to have any special talent, or to be one of the few who has been able to find it. By making your hero-system the service of your Creator, you have the distinction of making a gift of your life no matter what the special quality of that gift is: as you last out your life with courage, forbearance and dignity you affirm your divine calling by simply living it out. Your Creator will make good your service, whether He

makes it good to you in any personal way, say, by way of spiritual immortality, or by way of being initiated into still unknown dimensions of cosmic life to serve equally there, in some kind of embodiment; or whether He makes it good in His own way, by using the sacrifice of your life to glorify and aggrandize His own work, His own design of the universe, whatever that may be: at least you have lived your life truly and not foolishly, if you die for good you at least die well.

According to Becker, what mankind fears most is not extinction, but extinction without meaning. The self-perpetuation motivation of man ultimately translates to the religious sphere. This is the meaning of Rank's (1961) critique of psychology as self-deception. All that psychology—and by extension, social science—has been able to accomplish by its striving to become a science has been to evade the belief that individuals have a soul. But, what is overlooked is that it was primarily this idea of a soul that once linked man's inner life to the transcendent realm of cosmic heroism (Becker, 1975: 157). All that social science can provide is a form of reflexivity that must inevitably lead to isolation. Social science, quite simply, is forcing man to abandon the heroic. In Becker's scheme, only religion can create the necessary hero-system which can give man the meaning he needs and wants. Only religious beliefs can overcome the crippling fear of death. Becker, thus, places himself in the camp of such contemporary American functionalists as Yinger (1957, 1963, 1970); O'Dea (1966); Berger (1967); and Luckmann (1967). Scharf (1971: 73) has summarized quite well the similarities in the works of these four writers:

> A feature common to the group of American scholars is the insistence that religious belief and ritual, being universal, can only be explained by equally universal qualities of human life, individual or society. They all agree in rejecting the old positivist view that religion arises in particular conditions of ignorance and intellectual inadequacy which will not last forever. They wish to show how certain essential attributes of humanity must issue in religious phenomena, and in attempting to do this they suggest that religion functions to support social values and rules.

Becker's views are most similar to Berger's (1967: 5-6) social constructionist position that man, because he does not have a given relationship to the world, must create such a relationship through culture. Nevertheless, he differs with Berger on three fundamental points. First, whereas Berger sees social reality's (Becker's social fiction) main function as a shield against terror in the face of meaningless chaos (1967: 22), Becker's position is closer to Berger's teacher, Alfred Schutz. According to Schutz (1967: XLIV) the social world "of relevances which governs us . . . is founded upon the basic experience of each of us: I know that I die and I fear to die." This is what Schutz (1967: 249) calls the "fundamental anxiety," that which leads man to create a social world that keeps thoughts of death away. Becker elaborates upon Schutz's "fundamental anxiety" and shows how man creates a "social fiction" based upon the immortality-striving principle. Second, Becker differs from Berger by integrating his phenomenological framework with a psycho-analytical base instead of with the social psychology of George Herbert Mead. Third, Becker's social theory is radical, while Berger's is inherently conservative. [5]

Instead of opting for the preservation of the fictional world in the face of perceived chaos, as Berger does ( Berger and Neuhaus, 1970), Becker was willing to accept the consequences that exposing the fictional nature of reality might unleash in the hope that exposure would bring freedom. The risks were very great: once the fictional nature of human existence is revealed, the individual can be deprived of heroic meaning.

## CONCLUSION

Most social scientists would simply dismiss Becker's views as the substituting of one myth, and in old one at that, for others. Nevertheless, we are still faced with the phenomenologists' basic truth: man cannot live without meaning. And traditional social science cannot provide this meaning. To say that this is not the role of social science is to confess to hopelessness, to compound the basic anxiety of human existence. This is exactly what Becker's "ideal-real" social science sought to overcome. Ernest Becker wanted to show how culture was robbing us of the possibility of being heroic. Genuine heroism was and is the power to support the contradictions that are implicit in human existence. The basic contradiction is "that for man not everything is possible" (Becker, 1973: 259). What man wants is immortality. Social science not only cannot provide this, it even takes belief in it away. According to Becker, only by combining social sciences with religion can man transcend the tragedy of mortality. To him, it was that simple. Whether he was right or not, of course, is not simple. But it is a question that must not be neglected, and this is just what traditional social science has done. By refusing to confront the ideal, not only in a religious sphere, but in all spheres, traditional social science has embraced sterility. Ernest Becker asked the right questions, it is now up to those who come after him, to see whether he came up with the right answers. In a small way this paper hopes to provide a possible direction for making this judgment.

## FOOTNOTES

1. Revised and expanded version of a paper read at the annual meeting of the Association for the Sociology of Religion. August, 1976, New York City.

2. Although a firm supporter of the equality of the sexes, I have used masculine references throughout to be consistent with Becker's style.

3. Ernest Becker was posthumously awarded the 1974 Pulitzer Prize for General Nonfiction for *"The Denial of Death"* (1973).

4. This position is quite similar to the views of C. Wright Mills and Erich Fromm, two social scientists greatly admired by Becker. See especially Gerth and Mills (1953), Mills (1959); and Fromm (1947, 1964).

5. For an analysis which argues for the essential conservative nature of all subjective positions, see McNall and Johnson (1975). Obviously, I would not agree with their conclusions, seeing Becker's phenomenological views as basically radical. For an analysis which discusses in more detail the radical potential of Becker's social phenomenology, see Scimecca (1978).

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