

## Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

DANIEL LIECHTY (Ed.), *The Ernest Becker Reader*. Seattle: University of Washington Press. 2005, 248 p. Index

Ernest Becker never enjoyed mainstream acceptance in the social sciences. Despite this, his most well-known work, the Pulitzer Prize winning *Denial of Death*, remains in print thirty years after its initial publication and Becker's untimely death from cancer at the age of 49. Perhaps his relative obscurity in academic circles stems from his lack of a disciplinary home; both his training and his academic postings spanned anthropology, psychiatry, education, and sociology. In this sense he was truly interdisciplinary and this is evident throughout *The Ernest Becker Reader*. Daniel Liechty seeks to show the development and continuity of Becker's thought and writing over the course of his short but prolific career. In choosing excerpts from Becker's many books and articles, Liechty aims to provide the "proper context" for contemporary readers of Becker's more famous works, which Liechty believes have been unfairly characterized as "dark and pessimistic about the human condition."

The brief introductory chapter is written by Liechty and here he offers a biographical sketch as well as a very concise and well-organized synopsis of the arguments Becker makes in his final books, *The Denial of Death* and its companion volume, *Escape From Evil*. The synopsis serves as welcome refresher for those familiar with Becker's work. For the uninitiated, the synopsis offered here is too brief to impart an adequate understanding and appreciation of Becker's nuanced and sophisticated theorizing, but will no doubt arouse curiosity in many readers. The rest of the book is all Becker, organized chronologically.

The first section reflects Becker's early career teaching at a medical college under the tutelage of Thomas Szasz. Although Becker does not follow Szasz and rarely cites him, the influence of Szasz is apparent in Becker's critical attitude toward mental illness, which he views as a psychosocial phenomenon. In emphasizing the social dimensions of mental health or illness, Becker's gift for synthesizing diverse theories is apparent as he meshes the insights of various psychoanalysts with those of figures such as Erving Goffman, G. H. Mead, and C. Wright Mills. This is followed by a critical appraisal of Freudian theory which discounts the instinctual basis of motivation as "spurious" and refocuses on the importance of symbolic meaning, language and culture. His ambivalent stance toward psychoanalysis remains evident throughout the second part of the book, where his psychosocial view of mental health leads to the view that modern

culture is alienating. Thus, his belief is that not just the individual but society needs to be changed if mental well-being is the goal. Becker then calls for educational reform, which is strongly influenced by the progressivism of John Dewey and squarely in the democratic tradition. It is also here that Becker argues for the synthesis of the social sciences into the “Science of Man” a project that he attempted to carry out in his own work, while lamenting the ineffectual narrowness and isolation of disciplines in contemporary academia.

Throughout these early writings, Becker is fascinated with the nature of meaning and significance and with the possibilities that the Enlightenment vision offers. Liechty largely succeeds in selecting excerpts that portray Becker as a humanist seriously dedicated to the realization of Enlightenment and democratic ideals. However, this does not mean the book is without darkness and profundity. After all, Becker's trademark is his pursuit of the truth of the human condition wherever it may lead him and his readers. The third and final section leads to the theory that Becker is famous for, namely that the awareness of death creates a universal anxiety that is allayed by culture, which provides mechanisms to repress or deny this anxiety with varying degrees of success. This may seem dark and pessimistic to some readers, but Becker never lapses into cynicism.

The Ernest Becker Reader can be recommended to anyone interested in catching a glimpse of Becker's intellectual development. However, those unfamiliar with Becker's major works should be directed to read them first, as they offer a more polished and compelling theoretical vision. This book could also be of interest to those who specialize in social theory and the sociology of knowledge as it represents a thoroughly original, North American style of theorizing that could be read against the backdrop of the post-modernism that was emerging in Europe around the same time that Becker was writing.

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