

Death Anxiety and the Political Economy of Power

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THINKING ABOUT DEATH

I've been thinking a lot about death recently. No, it's not something that came about because of the global pandemic and my new daily ritual of checking graphs on COVID-19 [death tolls](#) around the world. It started a few years back when I became interested in the philosophy of consciousness and thinking about consciousness served as a sort of gateway drug for thinking about death.

The debate about consciousness (what it is? why do we have it?) often starts with the mind-body problem. Delving into that issue led me to a [lecture by Shelly Kagan](#) on dualism versus physicalism. As Kagan explains, dualists maintain that a person has both a physical body and a non-physical component, referred to as a soul or a mind or a spirit, while physicalists take a materialist stance, claiming that a person is only a physical body, even though that body gives rise to creative thought. The two approaches, which Kagan traces back to [Plato's Phaedo](#), lead to fundamentally opposing views about the nature of death and what it might mean for a person to outlive their physical body. In short, dualists believe in life after death while physicalists don't. This lecture was part of an online course devoted entirely to the philosophy of death, which I ended up watching in its entirety (and reading [the accompanying book](#)).

Kagan is a masterful lecturer; his ability to riff on complex topics all while sitting causally atop a desk is a sight to be behold! But his approach is just too analytical for my taste. Death is just too colourful a subject to be captured through formal logic alone. And perhaps it's the Aristotelian in me, but I would argue that making the mind-body problem the foundation of a philosophical inquiry into death abstracts too much from history and the vital question of how these linkages between consciousness and death unfold through the evolution of human societies.

CONSCIOUSNESS AS CONSPIRACY

Months after finishing Kagan's book, I was having a conversation with my colleague Amin Samman about these topics, and he recommended that I read Thomas Ligotti's [Conspiracy Against the Human Race](#). As a philosophical pessimist (and acclaimed horror fiction writer), Ligotti gives a spin on consciousness that I had yet to encounter. In most of the reading I'd done at that point, consciousness was presented as this wondrous miracle, one that should be fully embraced for the gifts that it provides: qualia! abstract thought! our own inner movie! But the acclaimed horror fiction writer paints a decidedly bleaker picture. Consciousness, he argues, is a curse, a monstrosity, a cruel joke, something that we humans must inevitably

try to limit. And the reason why consciousness is something to be limited is because it brings acute awareness of our own inevitable mortality. It's consciousness that makes us aware of the fact that we are, in Ligotti's words, 'hunks of spoiling flesh on disintegrating bones.'

Conspiracy Against the Human Race is powerful stuff. So powerful that some sort of existential warning label should be blazoned on the front cover. Although it's difficult to swallow, the book convinced me that philosophical pessimism needs to be taken seriously. But on a personal level, I struggle to see what I can do with these insights. Consciousness makes us aware of our inevitable mortality, yes. This fills life with a lot of suffering, it's dark and unpleasant at times, all undeniably true. I acknowledge and accept this and still think life is worth living. So where to go from there? And as a social scientist, I also struggle with how to use these insights to understand human society and to help make sense of our place in the world. It's not clear whether philosophical pessimism sheds much light on the most pressing issues in political economy: inequality, hierarchy, identity, violence, power, money, production, culture and ecology.

TERROR MANAGEMENT THROUGH IMMORTALITY PROJECTS

Even if Ligotti doesn't deal with these issues in any systematic way, he does provide some clues as to alternative sources that do. In a short section buried deep inside the book, Ligotti introduces, and then more or less dismisses, the ideas of [Ernest Becker](#) (1924-1974) and [Terror Management Theory](#) (TMT), an approach that has emerged in recent decades to formalize and empirically investigate Becker's basic claims. Trained as a cultural anthropologist, Becker's thinking represents the very best of non-disciplinary social science. His last three books [The Birth and Death of Meaning](#), [The Denial of Death](#), and [Escape from Evil](#), are eclectic in the best sense of the term, drawing on insights from Darwin, Kierkegaard, Freud, Rank, Marx, and Mumford to develop [an evolutionary, existentialist, psychodynamic theory of society](#).

Becker's work begins with the foundational question of social science: what makes us tick? In other words, what is it that distinguishes humans from other animals? To explore this question, Becker adopts a basic evolutionary premise from Darwin, claiming that humans share with all other living creatures a desire to keep on living and to pass on their genetic material to the next generation. Yet what makes us different from other animals is our unusually large forebrain, which gives us the capacity for abstract thought. Thanks to our braininess, we humans are aware of our existence, but also aware of the fact that our existence one day comes to an end. Humans, Becker claims, are unique among animals in being keenly aware of their own mortality. We may be homo faber, homo economicus, homo ludens, but more fundamentally, we are homo mortalis.

In recognising the centrality of death awareness to human consciousness, Becker finds himself on similar terrain to Ligotti and other philosophical pessimists. Like the pessimists, Becker holds that our awareness of death is like a cruel joke, one that fills existence with absurdity, dread and anxiety. But Becker goes a step further than the pessimists in tackling systematically the following question. If consciousness brings awareness of our inevitable demise, shouldn't this be paralyzing? In other words, how can we possibly function given the existential terror that comes with awareness of death?

Becker argues that as clever creatures we find ways to cope; we develop strategies of terror management through culture. The cultural scheme of things gives meaning to our lives, it fills us with self-esteem, it helps us to find purpose in the universe, it gives us identities and souls, it allows individuals to connect to something more enduring than themselves (religions, nations), it is, in Becker's words, a 'necessary lie' that defends us against death anxiety. In this way, Becker argues that history can be seen as a succession of immortality projects. These immortality projects can be literal, through belief in the afterlife, or symbolic, through procreation and the handing down our genetic material or lasting achievements in the arts and sciences. At the heart of these immortality projects are hero systems, which confer power and authority to those in society who embody the death-defying life force and control the main rituals of the prevailing immortality project.

THE EVIDENCE

Conceptualizing culture as a mechanism for coping with death anxiety provides new ways of understanding social conflict. As the founders of TMT, Sheldon Solomon, Jeff Greenberg and Tom Pyszczynski, explain in their book [*The Worm at the Core*](#): 'Because cultural conceptions of reality keep a lid on mortal dread, acknowledging the legitimacy of beliefs contrary to our own unleashes the very terror those beliefs serve to quell.' To have your cultural worldview challenged is to be *threatened with death*.

The Worm at the Core describes a number of experiments that social psychologists have conducted to demonstrate the ways in which our subconscious fears about death compel us to cling to our cultural moorings in often disturbing and destructive ways:

- American students asked to complete a survey reflecting on their own mortality rated the views of a pro-America professor much higher, and the views of an anti-America professor much lower, than a control group who filled in a survey about food;
- American judges asked to complete a survey reflecting on their own mortality gave out much more punitive sentences than the control group of judges who did not complete the survey;
- Germans interviewed in front of a regular shop felt no particular affinity for Germanness, but those interviewed in front of a cemetery preferred German food, cars and vacation spots to foreign ones;
- Canadians who read an essay belittling common Canadian values generated more death-related responses in a word-stem task than the control group (the same was true for Christians who read a text about evolution);
- Americans reminded of their own mortality or the events of 9/11 were more supportive of pre-emptive nuclear attacks on countries posing no immediate threat to the US, Israelis reminded of death were more supportive of violence against Palestinians and pre-emptive strikes on Iran, Iranians reminded of death were more supportive of suicide bombings and even became more interested in becoming suicide bombers themselves;
- Americans reminded of death didn't have an increased proclivity for everyday consumption items like Pringles or Chevy cars compared to the control group, but did have more interest in 'owning a high-status, self-esteem-boosting Lexus or Rolex';
- Poles reminded of death were asked to draw coins and bank notes on a sheet of paper and overestimated the size of the coins relative to the control group.

This is just a small sample of the hundreds of experiments confirming the predictions of TMT. In the experimental setting, researchers are able to treat death anxiety as a variable, contrasting the responses of the experimental group to a control group, with stunning effect. But what about those social scientists among us who are not and probably never will be experimentalists? The insights of Becker and TMT appear highly relevant to political economy, but the main problem, as I see it, is how to operationalize these insights when conducting empirical research outside of a laboratory setting. Without an experimental research design, it's difficult to see how death anxiety could be measured, and therefore made variable, in order to test the theory's hypotheses. And without reliable non-experimental measures of death anxiety, it is unclear how to conduct societal-level and long-term research in this area.

If death anxiety animates human behaviour, and if death anxiety is a constant feature of human history, then how do we explain changes across time and in different geographical settings? For example, is it possible to reduce differences between the United States (a more hierarchical, more violent, more ecologically destructive, more unequal society) and Norway (a less hierarchical, less violent, less ecologically destructive, more equal society), to differences in the way that they cope with mortal dread? Despite uncertainties about how to operationalize these ideas in my own research, I can think of a number of ways in which they are relevant to anyone interested in the political economy of power.

DEATH AND SOCIAL ORDER

The first has to do with the history of capitalism and what differentiates it from previous social orders. If history is, as Becker claims, a succession of immortality projects, then this line of thinking might enrich our understanding of the historical development of political economic systems. In an ambitious new project, Jonathan Nitzan and Shimshon Bichler have been working on developing a [new framework](#) for categorizing and analyzing political economic systems as hierarchical modes of power. These efforts are partly inspired by Marx's concept of the mode of production but go beyond Marx in anchoring societal transformations not in production, but in the broader relations of social power. Modes of power are accompanied by distinct concepts of power. In Nitzan and Bichler's words:

The tentative hypothesis is that 'modes of power' and 'concepts of power' are joint historical entities: each mode of power is articulated by and constructed with its own, often unique concepts of power – while specific concepts of power are enfolded in the mode of power from which they emerge. This jointness means that the ancient city-states and empires of Mesopotamia and Egypt, insofar as they constituted a specific mode of power, had their own unique concepts of power; that the feudal mode of power in Europe and Japan, if we can indeed speak about it in those terms, had its own singular concepts of power; and that the capitalist mode of power, just like its predecessors, developed with its own proprietary concepts of power. We call these joint entities COP-MOPs, a tentative acronym for Concepts of Power–Modes of Power.

What if we were to integrate Becker's immortality projects into Nitzan and Bichler's concepts of power? What would be the unique immortality projects enfolded within different historical modes of power? How can Becker's immortality projects help to distinguish the capitalist

concept of power from previous concepts of power, including the feudal concept of power in medieval Europe and Japan, as well as the slave and state-bureaucratic concepts of power of the ancient world? These are the types of questions that can occupy a lifetime, but I will sketch some very preliminary thoughts I've been developing over the past few weeks.

First, the immortality project of the capitalist concept of power is symbolic, anchored in the differential accumulation of wealth and income, while the immortality projects of previous concepts of power were literal, anchored in the idea of an afterlife. Second, the immortality project of the capitalist concept of power is associated with what is, at least in principle, a dynamic and flexible class structure, while previous concepts of power are associated with mostly static social hierarchies.

I would argue that one of the defining features of capitalism's immortality project is its unique capacity to generate anxiety. One aspect of this anxiety is the fact that the symbolic seems less certain than the literal. Leaving a large inheritance, your name on buildings, or charitable donations may help to quell fears about death, but this palliative is less comforting than the thought that we will join our creator and loved ones in some heavenly paradise. That uncertainty fuels the desire in capitalist society to accumulate power without end, a drive that is reinforced by the fact that its object of accumulation (money) is itself symbolic and therefore potentially limitless.

The dynamic class structure of capitalism intensifies that anxiety. In previous concepts of power, a person's position in the class hierarchy determined access to the afterlife, and their position within that class structure was more or less fixed. If you were born a serf, you'd die a serf. Religious doctrine offered an explicit set of rules on how people were to behave in order to ensure their ticket to heaven. In capitalism, a person's position in the class hierarchy also determines their symbolic immortality, but unlike previous immortality projects, this position in the class structure is not fixed. [Even though social mobility has been on the decline in the capitalist heartlands in recent years](#), there is nothing in principle stopping someone born into the bottom 50 percent of the income distribution from becoming the next Jeff Bezos, just as there is nothing in principle stopping Jeff Bezos from losing his shirt and falling into the bottom 50 percent of the income distribution. Our access to the immortality is less secure and the dynamic class structure means that we are ceaselessly caught up in the death-defying accumulation of capital as power. Until the very end, there's no rest, and that is a recipe for anxiety.

DEATH AND HUMAN NATURE

Keeping with the theme of ambitious projects, Becker's ideas might also provide some of the scaffolding for a power-based theory of human nature. In [an important article](#) in the *Review of International Political Economy*, Nitzan concluded with a question: 'is power inherent to human society, and if so, what are the implications for the future of capitalism and beyond?' He mentioned the writings of [Arthur Koestler on the early Israeli kibbutz](#), which suggested that even in these small-scale communist societies, the instinct to dominate had only been 'tamed and harnessed' but never entirely abolished. This observation leads Koestler, and Nitzan, to ponder whether the harnessing of power is that best that we can achieve.

In *Escape from Evil*, Becker expands on this line of inquiry by examining the historical origins of inequality. He notes how prehistoric (hunter-gatherer) societies were egalitarian in terms of wealth distribution, but that key forms of social differentiation nevertheless existed. Certain individuals had influence based on personal qualities: they were extra skilled in hunting and warfare, they dealt directly with spirits in the invisible world, they were physically strong, or they were simply old (when you outlive others, you are thought to have special powers). Skilled warriors and hunters made a point of displaying these powers through the accumulation of trophies and merit badges such as the scalps of slain enemies or the teeth of a slain animal. The purpose of these objects was to communicate the skills and courage of the hunter-warrior class, and most importantly, to show their superiority relative to others. As a result of this perceived superiority, the hunter-warrior class gained special privileges such as wives and the right to claim some parts of common property as their special hunting grounds. Stratification also accompanied the development of religion. As the controllers of ritual, shamans and elders had privileged access to the supernatural realm, which in turn led to all sorts of earthly privileges in the form of food, leisure and security.

For Becker, the interesting question is not why stratification happened in early societies but *why it was allowed to happen*. In other words, why did others acquiesce so willingly to these special privileges and what does it tell us about human nature? The answer he gives is that these people all possessed qualities that 'helped to secure life to assure the perpetuation of the tribe.' Those at the top of early stratified societies had immortality power, and people followed them in the hope that their death-defying power would shield them from mortal threats. As Becker explains:

This is the basic role and function of the hero in history: he is the one who gambles with his very life and successfully defies death, and men follow him and eventually worship his memory because he embodies the triumph over what they fear most, extinction and death. He becomes the focus of the peculiarly human passion play of the victory over death.

This view of pre-historical human societies is at odds with [Rousseau's ideal](#) of the 'state of nature,' which claimed that early humans were free and equal, and only become unfree and unequal with the development of private property and the state. Power, according to Becker's analysis, is an enduring feature of human history (and pre-history). And the crucial point is that the power of those at the top of the hierarchy is not based on domination and physical coercion alone. People tend to choose unfreedom; they willingly subjugate themselves to people and things that represent immortality power. Becker quotes [Norman Brown](#) to reinforce this point:

If the emergence of social privilege marks the Fall of Man, the fall took place not in the transition from 'primitive communism' to 'private property' but in the transition from ape to man.

PRACTISING HOW TO DIE

The ideas presented here might sound rather grim. But this doesn't have to be the case. A focus on death anxiety might help us to understand some of our most destructive behaviours toward each other and toward our natural environment. If subconscious death anxiety is

indeed at the root of our destructive behaviour, then we need to come up with less destructive ways of dealing with that anxiety. Put simply, we need to find better ways of dying, and this is where philosophy becomes crucial. As Socrates famously argued in *The Phaedo*, those who engage in philosophical thinking are 'practicing nothing other than dying and being dead.'

The urgent task of any radical intellectual endeavour must be to formulate new immortality projects, which render subconscious death anxiety conscious and make transparent the ways in which our mortal fears lead to hierarchy. Staring death in the face means embracing freedom in a profound existential sense and channelling those anxieties into more creative and more humane ways of living.