

REMEMBERING JOSEPH M. BECKER, S.J.

Edward J. O'Boyle, Ph.D.
Mayo Research Institute
www.mayoresearch.org

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Questions and comments should be directed to:

Edward J. O'Boyle, Ph.D.
Mayo Research Institute
edoboyle737@gmail.com

I first met Father Becker at Saint Louis University in September 1961 when due to a sudden exodus of economics faculty earlier in the year he was called upon to teach a graduate seminar in labor force economics. That is, how employment and unemployment are defined, measured, and analyzed. He entered the seminar room dressed in his clericals, removed his black hat, took his seat at the head of the long table, introduced himself, and smiled. Though I had been an economics undergraduate major at DePaul University before entering the graduate program at Saint Louis University, this was my first experience with a priest teaching economics. It turned out to be the most significant development in my entire graduate school experience.

During the break in the 6:30PM to 9:00PM class period, Father Becker asked me to walk with him for a while through the building. He said that he wanted me to do my MA thesis under his direction, and strongly suggested that it focus on the duration of benefits under state unemployment insurance (UI) laws. I learned much later that Father Becker had been asked by the head of the economics department to take me under his wing. I accepted Father Becker's offer even though I had no idea as to his professional standing. Over time, I came to realize that Father Becker was widely regarded as the pre-eminent UI research specialist -- he never considered himself an expert -- in the United States.

By 1961 he had published one book on the problem of abuse in the payment of UI benefits which was his doctoral dissertation at Columbia University. He referred to it simply as "a study of limits and a limited study." One hallmark of Father Becker's writing was to find just the right language to say what had to be said in as few words as possible. His second book addressed the role of state advisory boards in helping state employment security agencies and state legislators improve their UI laws. It wasn't under many years later that I appreciated that his first book was concerned with human material need -- a topic with which conventional economics even today is uncomfortable -- and that his second had to do with the principle of subsidiarity and the effectiveness of advisory councils as intermediate bodies in the social order.

His third book, published in 1965, was a collection of articles on helping the unemployed written by several of the best researchers in the United States. In it Father Becker, who signed himself JMB, classified programs of aid to the unemployed as alleviative, curative, and preventive. His own contribution on the adequacy of UI benefit amount -- an alleviative aspect of UI -- that had been published several years earlier as a monograph. This is from the introduction.

This preliminary discussion of norms gives the monograph the general proportions of a medieval castle -- it is almost half foundation -- but there is no other way to build in the morass of "adequacy." To change the metaphor -- it is precisely at this point, in the selection of norms, that the rabbit gets into the hat. Therefore the process of selection of norms should be as explicit and as open as possible. The review of norms serves the additional purpose of revealing my own personal value judgments (they have probably influenced my selection and arrangement of the data) so that anyone

who disagrees with my judgments can the more easily pinpoint the disagreement and substitute his own set of values.

This is from the body of the monograph.

A satisfactory norm of adequacy must have two elements -- one positive, by which it can explain why benefits are as large as they are, and one negative, by which it can explain why they are no larger. In philosophical terminology it must have the two elements that constitute all contingent being, an actuating principle and a limiting principle. The two elements are inextricably intertwined and exert mutual causality on each other. Although they may be discussed separately, neither suffices for a concrete conclusion except in relationship to the other.

It was during this period that I began to know JMB through many sessions of his review and comments on my thesis research. I shall never forget what he wrote on the first draft of first core chapter. “Ed, you write as if you have never had a course in economics in your life.” Here his emphasis was on “write.” He slowly and carefully began introducing me to the fundamentals of good writing: short sentences, active voice, parallel construction, what you intend to emphasize is to be placed at the end of the sentence. If you are having difficulty in finding the right words to express yourself, it’s because your thinking is incomplete or defective. The solution? Explain yourself to a friend who knows nothing about what you are trying to say. If your listener understands you, you are ready to put it into writing. And, he stated, one of the mistakes the new Ph.D. in economics often makes is trying to say more than the data will allow. If you notice one statistical error in your work, re-check all of that work. I was surprised to learn that JMB always submitted his written work to his own copy editor who would point out problems which he had overlooked.

His method of commentary was unique too. In a paragraph in which, for example, the third sentence follows from the first two, he would bracket the first two with “A” and the third with “B” and then write in the margin “more than A is required to prove B.” A typical comment went like this: “There is a relationship between social security and human capital - but I wonder if you have not concentrated on this to the exclusion of more important aspects of the problem.” And like this: “I do not think Belloc would accept this; nor do I.” His highest compliment was simply “good” which appeared in the margin of chapter one where I had argued that extending the duration of UI benefits is like building a bridge across a greater distance. That is, the structure of the bridge (UI program) must change to accommodate the longer span (duration of benefits). I never before or since have been paid a higher compliment.

JMB insisted if you really want to understand UI it is necessary to “roll up your sleeves and get to work inside the state employment security agency.” My first job after completing my graduate studies was as a labor market analyst for the Illinois State Employment Service in East St. Louis. JMB was absolutely right. The right place for doing UI research is inside the state agency.

In 1968 he published a book on *private* programs of benefits for the unemployed which had been established through collective bargaining. His interest here again revolves around the principle of subsidiarity: to what extent are private programs effective, thereby reducing or eliminating the need for intervention on the part of the federal government?

His fifth and last UI book was published four years later. In it JMB focuses on the experience-rated tax used by many states which impose a higher tax on payrolls for those employers whose workers were laid off and were drawing UI benefits -- a curative/preventive aspect of UI. This is his conclusion:

The further we move in the direction of the undifferentiated demogrant, available to everyone who belongs to the “demos,” the less sense experience rating will make. On the other hand, if we choose to maintain a set of income maintenance programs that are closely geared to the market and operate like deferred wages, with benefits proportioned to wages and with taxes levied solely on payrolls and employers, unemployment insurance as presently constituted will be a necessary part of such a system and experience rating is likely to be considered a desirable part of unemployment insurance.

In 1959 JMB was invited to testify before a Congressional committee. He introduced himself as follows

My name is Joseph M. Becker of the Society of Jesus. I am associate director of the Institute of Social Order at Saint Louis University. I represent no organized group, least of all the Catholic Church. I am here at the invitation of the committee’s chairman, simply in my capacity as a academic specialist in the field of unemployment compensation.

Following his testimony, the first person on the committee to respond said this.

Father Becker ... you have given us the best analysis of our problem in connection with this unemployment compensation business that we have ever had ...

In the early 1970s, when called upon by his Jesuit superiors, he plunged into the work of trying to understand what was happening within the Jesuit community in the U.S. since Vatican II. As he did with his UI work, JMB traveled the U.S. interviewing Jesuits and poring over the various documents and written materials in files in Jesuit communities. This is his insight regarding change in the post-Vatican II world .

It was a shift along four axes of vital tension in the Western world. Because these tensions reflect basic understandings of reality, any change in them inevitably produces at least temporary dislocation in society. As shifts in the earth’s crust have produced earthquakes, so shifts in these basic tensions have produced shocks felt by all the major social structures of Western society -- by the family, the school, the military establishment, the labor union -- but especially by the Church and her religious orders ... The shift along the subjective-objective axis is first because it

seems to be the key movement, the one which, understood, leads most naturally to an understanding of the others. The move along the relative-absolute axis is very closely related to the increased emphasis in subjectivity ... The shift from the sacral toward the secular was of its nature, of course, disturbing to sacral institutions. This shift was the direct result of independent developments in Western culture, especially in the field of science ... The shift toward individualism was felt by all institutions -- the family, the school, the state, the church, the armed forces -- but was especially felt by the religious orders, for the traditional religious order was the epitome of institutional life ... If any one change could be said to mark the 1960s, it was the altered understanding of authority, both of law and of tradition. The impact on institutions was enormous.

Father Becker understood that there was more to life than work. He told me on one occasion that he would not be available for the next two weeks because he would be in Colorado trout fishing. At the end of one session on my thesis, he asked me if I was dating. On another occasion he related with a smile that he had read *The Exorcist* and was delighted with the author's description of the Jesuit who was summoned from the Middle East to exorcize the devil. JMB said that he had been living in the Jesuit community at Saint Louis University when the actual exorcism took place and which served as the foundation of the novel. He recalled that the Jesuit scholastics who were asked to assist the exorcist returned to the community physically beaten up. Oddly, JMB's office at the time of the filming of the motion picture was in the old street car barn which Georgetown University had acquired for office space. The long steps from the upper to the lower street which run alongside the car barn are the same steps that are featured toward the end of the picture.

In 1991 the Association for Social Economics which JMB had joined in the 1940s as a charter member presented him with the Thomas Divine Award for lifetime contributions to social economics and the social economy. He reminisced that he had known Thomas Divine, a fellow Jesuit who was one of the two Jesuit founding fathers of the Association, for many years.

Most telling of all, though, are his remarks on the occasion of a special symposium in 1991 to honor his work. In explaining why he choose to concentrate on unemployment, he said

The final reason is, and was, a vision of Judgment Day and of the Judge saying
"I was unemployed, Joseph, and you supported me."

Joseph Becker was more than a man of great gifts, a man of great insights, and man who drove to the heart of the matter. He was a Jesuit who lived the Gospel message in his own work, and encouraged others to look for Jesus in theirs.

