

BOOK REVIEW

A social activist in science

Making Genes, Making Waves: A Social Activist in Science

J Beckwith

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Reviewed by R Brave

The only unqualifiedly good thing in this life or any other, philosopher Immanuel Kant famously opined, is a good will. In which case, Harvard microbiologist Jon Beckwith appears to be one of those rare good things, with his intense desire to ever and always and gladly do his duty toward all permeating his memoir, *Making Genes, Making Waves: A Social Activist in Science* (Harvard University Press, 2002). However, even a good will may not suffice to serve as the basis for seriously reflective autobiography and, arguably, may be counter to Beckwith's own purposes of stimulating more incisive discussion of the relation between scientists and society. This represents a profound disappointment over a missed opportunity, since Beckwith has been near the center of so many of the important public controversies in the development of genetics during the past three decades. Whether it was recombinant DNA, behavioral genetics, sociobiology or genetic testing, Beckwith was always among the first to the barricades, simultaneously seeking to protect the public and defend the integrity of the science as he saw it. Taking responsibility for the social interpretation and impact of genetic researches and discoveries was his coda, branded into his soul as a member of the generation that came of age in the shadow of Hiroshima and the Holocaust and in the light of the 1960s liberation movements.

Beckwith's voice and actions were specially noted in these contests as, in 1969, he was the first scientist to isolate a gene. Indeed, Beckwith made certain they were noted, beginning with his public donation of a cash award from Eli Lilly for his scientific achievement to the revolutionary Black Panther Party. Aligning himself later with the Science for the People group, Beckwith would devote considerable energies in the ensuing years to combating vigorously even the least whiff of genetic determinism.

Some of the book's most revealing pages relate the powerful institutional forces within academia that perceive even a respectful challenge to its desires as a threat to science itself. Beckwith's portrayal of these forces in action is chillingly all too familiar to anyone who has witnessed or experienced the viciousness that can occur in the vales of veritas. When, in the mid-1970s, Beckwith suggested that there might be scientific and ethical difficulties in a colleague's search for the link between XYY children and aggressive criminality, he nearly found himself de-tenured. Of course, since then, research universities have found the means to pre-empt such challenges by creating bioethics departments to

devise their justifications in advance of any argument. Beckwith's commitments and stories particularly shine forth in the American context, where the ethical standard of individual choice is held with near pathological devotion, and any mention of the social context and social consequences is considered deluded and treasonous. However, this is also where Beckwith most fails his sympathetic readers, and perhaps himself. The social stance is undergoing severe rehabilitation in the wake of the collapse of socialism, yet Beckwith makes no effort to inquire into the underpinnings of his own social activism or beliefs. He denies being a Marxist (or at least having ever read Marx), yet so many of his associates and associations are clearly in that tradition. One can only react painfully to the loss to scientific advance with his glancing admission of the endless hours he spent arguing science and strategies with a Marxist sect known as the 'October League'. A person might as well have gambled his destiny on debating women's liberation with the Taliban. Still, even if he cannot clarify for himself or for us the social understandings we might share, his repeated warning against the recurrent temptation to seek solutions to social problems with 'science' gives his memoir its historic and prophetic value.

The tension between Beckwith's social activism and his scientific work is a theme running throughout. This may in part also account for the paucity of self-reflection, as the trade-offs were real for a scientist of his caliber, and at times must have been torturously painful. He openly struggles with the extent to which his laboratory work was sacrificed to his political engagements, perhaps even including a Nobel Prize eluding his grasp after such major success at a young age. However, looking back, Jon Beckwith with his good will sees himself as having had little choice: 'Perhaps what matters most is doing what's right, whether it succeeds or not. I am happy with my choice to stay in science; I am not sure that I could have continued without devoting some of my energies to social and political activism within my field'. Beckwith's activism occurred during the second half of the heyday of molecular biology researches, a period when discussions over the social impacts of genetics were mostly speculative and thoroughly ideological. That period is over, replaced now with a global industrialized life science enterprise, and with applications of genetics rapidly becoming integrated throughout society. Whether it is behavioral genetics or genetic engineering, the debates will increasingly be over substantive findings and their uses. Whatever difficult choices actually materialize, the good will of Jon Beckwith and others will be needed more than ever.

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