



Humanities on the Cusp: The Rise and Fall of Social Sciences

BRIJ MOHAN

School Of Social Work, Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge, LA 70808, USA .



Article History

Published on: 13 November 2019

“The humanities have not yet achieved nor will they ever achieve a full understanding of the meaning of our species' existence... The human condition is a product of history,” writes Edward Wilson (2014: 17-18). He concludes:

“Science and humanities are, it is true, are fundamentally different from each other in what they do. But they are complementary to each other in origin, and they arise from some creative processes in the human brain. If the heuristic and analytic power of science can be joined with introspective creativity of the humanities, human existence will rise to an infinitely more productive and interesting meaning.” (2014:1870.

I concur with Edward Wilson. Hence, this brief essay with certain musings from a humanist writer-editor. Social sciences did not exist when science was sprouting in the greenland of renaissance. Science per se did not exist until a prescient apple that fell on Newton! May be until Gelliole drank to death by saying: “It still moves”.

Ernest Becker, a cultural sociologist I admire most, concluded about ‘the rediscovery of the science of man’:

“We stand where Galilio stood, and Bruno. But the question is, do we today have their courage to strike out for the new? Galileo supposedly recanted only once, under pressure of the Church, and then murmured ‘Eppur si muove.’ We have been recanting under the pressure of physical and natural

CONTACT Brij Mohan ✉ Brijmohan128@Gmail.com 📍 School Of Social Work, Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge, LA 70808, USA .



© 2019 The Author(s). Published by Enviro Research Publishers.

This is an Open Access article licensed under a Creative Commons license: Attribution 4.0 International (CC-BY).

Doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.12944/CRJSSH.2.2.03>

science models for over one hundred years, and yet we seem not to dare insist on our equivalent of "Yet it moves": namely, "But man is (potentially) free." (Becker, 1974: 31; see, also, 1968)

Herbert Marcuse wrote: "Man is free even in the hands of his executioner." The tragedy in today's scientific world is that scientists in general and social scientists in particular usually don't have the *courage* to think, let alone speak and act. Commoditization of education, demise of dissent, dysfunctionally organized academia, and *wall-martization* of discourse has promoted mediocrity, mendacity and counterproductive inquiry and shoddy research. Academic freedom, identity crisis and political correctness in the digital age tend to exacerbate issues which cause dissipation--to say the least-- of valued resources. Our credulity permeates politics of existence.

At no other time, history has been so violently challenged as now. The new forces of artificial intelligence and digital revolution are reshaping "the meaning of human existence." This fact alone makes social science an important partner in making preemptive, inclusive choices that can save humanity from itself. Nietzsche was indeed when he wrote about the prescience of "the triumph of nihilism."²

Robotic surgery, gene-editing, electrifying medicine, commercialization of human organs, and other innovations are shaping the future of healthcare. This *Brave New World* is neither utopian, nor dystopian. It will be what policy choices make it out to be. The classic 'to be or not to be' dilemma is irrelevant today. It's politics of science, technology, and research as well as sociology of those in need that will define future choices. Dr. Naveen Rao, senior vice president of health at the Rockefeller Foundation succinctly offers an insight:

"Women are dying, not because we don't know how to save them. They're dying because we have yet to decide they're worth saving. And as a man, I'm ashamed." (Time, November 4, 2019:61)

If this logic is employed widely where AI serves only the elitists' interests, we get a very pessimistic view of the future. There are added factors in the geo-politico-cultural contexts where humanity is defined by *The Economic Man*, the new custodian of social well being. Since Humanities cannot compete with computer-management sciences, people who think, feel, and envision are in danger of self-extermination. Rapacious academic campuses are complicit in this market place where knowledge is being manufactured. I sincerely doubt if Sartre could ever earn a promotion and tenure at any American university in today's academic culture.

Humanities and social sciences confront similar challenges. Broadly, these issues can be discussed in three interdependent sections: a) nexus of science, technology and social policy; b) Humanities and AI (artificial intelligence); and c) Human well-being, happiness and an uncertain future. It's unrealistic and dangerous to separate these areas in the interest of human survival.

I believe the *Holy Grail* of Humanities is the essence of *humans*, homo sapiens, whose existence predates the emergence of God. What Foucault calls, *The Will to Know*, seems to be in short supply as Google can answer every question and on-line courses can offer diplomas in law and medicine, let alone social work.

There is a law in economics: Supply creates its own demand. No wonder digitalism has revolutionized organization and delivery of disciplines in natural and social sciences, especially humanities. Nonetheless, a moral and legitimacy crisis persists. If social sciences' best exemplars are represented by 'why Americans are bowling alone', 'broken windows' theory, and the like, then we have a problem. Even much celebrated Amartya Sen's 'economics' and 'philosophy' make no sense when he invokes a kitsch of economics and philosophy. Jared Diamond's 12 "turning points" for nations in crisis (2019) appear self-serving if examined from a critical lense.

"In a world in which everything, including economy and finance, is religion, there is no separate religious domain... It was not Abraham and Moses who invented Judaism, but the other way round (as with Jesus Christ and Christianity)," (Debray, 2004: 31-32). Régis Debray writes:

"An Eternal Father who is younger than His progeny? Comparative chronologies bear witness to this bizarre circumstance. We His children are ancient in relation to our Creator, who may be august but is a late bloomer. He is at best, six thousand years old; Homo sapiens is between fifty and a hundred thousand years old" (2004: 16).

We stand alone in the cosmic wilderness. Our needs and proclivities to survive predate our Creator. Since His divine order has failed to humanize justice and used abstract proxies to justify inequality--like *karma* and *dharma*—it's upon us, mortals, to design our future. Natural sciences offer us material tools; humanities and social sciences hold the compass. There are no absolutes in this itinerary. Dignity, decency and *Enlightenment* are the only pathways to peace and progress: our destiny.

References

1. Becker, Ernest. (1974. The rediscovery of the science of man,' in John M. Romanyshyn *Social Science and Social Welfare*. New York: Council on Social Work Education.
2. Becker, Ernest. (1968) *The Structure of Evil: An Essay on the Unification of the Science of Man*. New York: The Free Press.
3. Debray, Régis. (2004) *God: An Itinerary*. London: Verso.
4. Diamond, Jared (2019) *Upheaval: Turning Points for Nations in Crisis*. New York: Little, Brown & Co.
5. Nietzsche, Friedrich ([1906]2006) *The Will to Power*. New York: Barnes and Noble.
6. Wilson, Edward (2014). *The Meaning of Human Existence*. New York: Liveright Publishing co.