

# ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE

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## *The Social Sciences and Public Policy*

As a result of the 18<sup>th</sup> century Enlightenment, Western Civilization began an intellectual journey to develop, in the words of philosopher David Hume, a “science of man.” The Enlightenment leaders sought for the social sciences a level of certainty achieved by Sir Isaac Newton during the previous century (the 17<sup>th</sup> century, aka the Scientific Revolution) for the hard sciences. Hence, the modern social sciences of psychology, sociology, anthropology, etc. were born. Have we achieved a “science of man?” Have we achieved as a civilization an ability to attain a level of certainty about human behavior? The US government often operates on the basis of social science in its public policy programs. This applies to how the government funds prison reform policies, criminal behavior policies, economic policies, federal housing policies, etc. Has this connection between social science and public policy in western civilization been successful?

- First of all, Jim Manzi, senior fellow at the Manhattan Institute and chairman of an applied artificial intelligence software company, has written an important article on this very topic. In his lengthy argument, Manzi gives focus to criminology as a test case. He suggests that this discipline provides an excellent illustration of the way social science addresses a social problem. Crime, like any human behavior, has complex causes and is therefore difficult to predict reliably. After a significant review of various methodologies and social science experiments, Manzi concludes that “after reviewing experiments not just in criminology but also in welfare-program design, education and other fields, I propose that three lessons emerge consistently from them.” (1) We should be very skeptical of claims for the effectiveness of new, counterintuitive programs and policies, and we should be reluctant to trump the trial-and-error process of social evolution in matters of economics and social policy. (2) Programs that try to change people are even more likely to fail than those that try to change incentives. For example, the list of failed attempts to change people to make them less likely to commit crimes is almost endless—prisoner counseling, transitional aid to prisoners, intensive probation, juvenile boot camps. (3) There is no silver bullet! Manzi writes, “Those rare programs that do work usually lead to improvements that are quite modest, compared with the size of the programs they are meant to address or the dreams of advocates.” He therefore concludes that “At the moment, we do not have anything remotely accomplishing a scientific understanding of human society. And the methods of experimentation in social science are not close to providing one for the foreseeable future. Science may someday allow us to predict human behavior comprehensively and reliably. Until then, we need to keep stumbling forward with trial-and-error learning as best we can.”
- Second, let’s consider economics. As columnist David Brooks has argued, the American economic liberal sees the US economy like a “big machine; the people in it like rational, utility maximizing cogs. The performance of the economic machine can be predicted with quantitative macroeconomic models.” These models can, therefore, but utilized to make

highly specific projections. For example, if the government borrows \$1 and then spends it, it will produce \$1.50 worth of economic activity, the model argues. If the government spends \$800 billion on a stimulus package, that will produce 3.5 million in new jobs, the model stipulates. “Everything is rigorous. Everything is science.” But is it? Obviously, the economy has not responded as the modelers predicted. There has not been the predicted flood of job creation the modelers predicted. Brooks refers to the work of Ethan Ilzetski of the London School of Economics and Enrique G. Mendoza and Carlos A. Vegh of the University of Maryland, who have argued that stimulus measures are generally not as effective in nations like the US with huge debt and floating exchange rates. Brooks correctly concludes that “It’s become harder to have confidence that legislators can successfully enact the brilliant policies that liberal technicians come up with. Far from entering the age of macroeconomic mastery and social science triumph, we seem to be entering an age in which statecraft is, once again, an art, not a science.” When you look at the world today, the nations that have survived the economic downturn that began in 2008 are not the nations that had clever stimulus packages. Rather, it was nations that followed the old wisdom of common sense—“simple regulations, low debt, high savings, hard work, few distortions.” Germany and China come to mind. Perhaps it is time to return to the fundamentals of common sense! Perhaps, as well, this common sense should be used to address the basic insolvency of the states that make up this union. Brooks comments that many states “are strangling on their own self-indulgence . . . [and] this has been the Democratic Party’s epic failure. The party believes in the positive uses of government. But if you want the country to share that belief, you have to provide a government that is nimble, tough-minded and effective. That means occasionally standing up to the excessive demands of public employee unions. Instead of standing up to those demands, the party has become captured by the unions. Liberal activism has become paralyzed by its own special interests.”

- Third, permit me to return for a moment, to the 18<sup>th</sup> century Enlightenment, where so much of this thinking began. (1) The Enlightenment affirmed the basic goodness of humans. There was no longer the doctrine of innate evil or original sin. Human beings were products of their environment and if you can change the environment (i.e., the culture) you will change the human being. If there is sin, it is an external sin that is part of the culture and changing the culture, changes the human being. (2) Education, this century believed, was critical to changing humans. It would sharpen the senses, enable the pursuit of science and thereby change human outlook and prejudice. Education was the key to transforming people, this century argued. (3) The Enlightenment was a thoroughly human-centered movement. Affirming the basic goodness of humanity, there was therefore, under the proper circumstances, really nothing the human race could not achieve. Humanity was on the escalator of human progress, destined for greatness. (4) The role of God in all this changed. This was not a century of atheists, but God was becoming increasingly irrelevant and unnecessary. He existed as the creator but little else. He was not the source of ethics, wisdom or knowledge. In fact, with Immanuel Kant, faith and reason were forever separated. Reason was, in fact, of little help in matters of theology and doctrine. Humans controlled their own destiny and reason was the tool for achieving that destiny. The revolution in the social sciences that grew out of the Enlightenment has produced the century in which we now live. This *Perspective* has demonstrated the inadequacy of the social sciences in attaining this elusive goal of a science of man. Instead of certainty, there is more confusion,

more despair and less certainty than ever. Perhaps it is time to return to the Bible's view of humanity: Humans have a problem—sin and rebellion against God. God has provided the solution—Jesus Christ through His death, burial and resurrection. That solution is appropriated by faith and human destiny is thereby changed. May God, who is rich in mercy and grace, penetrate the hearts and minds of the lost civilization we all love—the United States. There is no other solution, for we are certainly learning that it is not a social-science-run government.

See Jim Manzi in *The Dallas Morning News* (5 September 2010); David Brooks in the *New York Times* (12 October and 16 November 2010); and James P. Eckman, *Perspectives from Church History*, pp. 64-69.