

Consilience in the New Millennium?

by Miles D. Wolpin

For half a century natural scientists have hoped that their empirical findings would be assimilated with alacrity by the humanities and social sciences. While this has transpired to a limited degree, ideologically-driven paradigmatic resistance to anithetical empirical findings has, if anything, intensified in the post-modern era. Ironically, there is an empirical explanation for this recalcitrance — one which should temper our optimism.

Caution, skepticism, and a sense of our limits are among the attributes of the conservative perspective. We should be quite careful when confronted with the optimistic scenarios of our future. This is particularly true for anyone cognizant of prevailing ideological trends in the West, East and South, or what Irving Louis Horowitz once termed the “Three Worlds of Development.” (1)

Despite the fact that C. P. Snow observed a marked hiatus between the humanities and natural sciences a half-century ago, there is little evidence that it has narrowed significantly since then. Indeed, the recent popularity of post-modern deconstructionism as a faith for growing numbers in conjunction with an impressive continuing neo-Marxist presence should inspire reserve in projecting probable empirical dominance. (2)

There are two ironic aspects of Wilson’s (1998:42, 62) optimism. Of lesser importance is the fact that his Enlightenment-inspired faith in the assimilation of biological and other scientific findings for the betterment of mankind serves to locate him in the progressive or left-leaning tendency -- certainly as someone with a liberal spirit. Yet the fact that our contemporary egalitarian intelligentsia places him on the right itself underscores

why our skepticism is in order.

This is suggestive of an even more fundamental ironic anomaly. Empirical findings — some of which are alluded to by Wilson — explain why the scientific paradigm is unlikely to prevail in the social “sciences” and the humanities, let alone in our civic value priorities. Perhaps in another millennium — and even then it is problematic — but certainly not in the next half century. The scenarios delineated by Huntington (1993), Kaplan (1994), and Francis (1999) appear to offer a better fit empirically with prevailing civic trends.

For Wilson (1968a:59, 62, 64) himself acknowledges man’s genetically influenced powerful needs for supervening group bonding or loyalty, spirituality and possibly a sense of equality. Doesn’t this explain the intense (“irrational”) and powerful resistance (Pearson, 1993) to conducting or disclosing research that may impugn biologically egalitarian assumptions?

While behavioral or empirical approaches have advanced within certain social sciences (e.g. economics, psychology, political science, economics) and history, the predominance of egalitarian ideology is reflected not only in resistance to or critiques of such “methodology,” but also by environmentally deterministic assumptions or constraints in its application.

Phenomenological, therapeutic and deconstructionist inroads affecting the foregoing areas and permeating literature, the arts, philosophy, religious studies as well as foreign language imply that empirical progress will be modest at best in the new millennium.

What momentum exists will be derived from the relatively unimpeded contributions to scientific and technological advance in other “hard” areas. As discoveries in such disciplines as physics, chemistry, astronomy, cybernetics, and particularly medicine indisputably enhance the power of mankind to control nature and cope with problems more cost-effectively, there will be a continuing “spinoff” impetus for biological research. Thus the anomalies (Kuhn 1966) of egalitarian

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paradigms will multiply and assume greater salience.

Yet tensions may be exacerbated, as will “professional” hostilities, when ideological paradigms and associated moral commitments are impugned. In some respects, even conservative predispositions may be threatened (e.g., “free markets” and the sanctity or “right to life”). Worse, empirical research on mass intelligence and intellectual competence is hardly a basis for optimism? Thus, following three decades or so of national priority (funding, curricular development, teacher training) for mathematics and natural sciences, the results have been dismal. U.S. students are doing very poorly on international testing, while the “average” citizen exhibits an eighth grade understanding of science.

Ultimately, as Wilson (1998:52) himself suggests, there is the lack of inspiration or appeal by the scientific paradigm itself. Whether deistic or atheistic, this Weltanschauung resonates as a dominant orientation among too few of even the narrow intellectual stratum. As he concedes, primal and instinctual theistic spirituality and/or neo-tribal group affinities continue to function, along with occasionally overlapping egalitarian inclinations, as paramount sources of inspiration at all levels of our “modern” social structure.

Among most peoples, and even the elite in the South and East, such tribal and theistic identities tend to be even more determinative. This, along with parallel affinities for structuralist egalitarian ideology, appears to be one of the empirical patterns of our era. Similarly, as the immigration invasion from the South reinforces militant multiculturalist movements within the “scientific” Euro-American ethno-cultural area, we can anticipate even more intensified resistance to biological research findings which do not enhance the self-esteem of such strata.

Thus with the partial exception of Japan, the prognosis for both positive and negative eugenic advance (Pearson, 1996) is problematic, as is that for morality (Levin, 1999:1-3) itself. This despite progress (Wilson, 1998a:58-65) toward empirical understanding of the latter’s evolutionary and neurological origins. Hence, caution and a sense of our limited prospects for improving the human condition would seem to be in order.

NOTES

1. While the East may no longer be state socialist,

much of its cultural heritage was influenced by the Mongols and Ottoman Empire. Authoritarian and despotic tendencies remain salient in many regions.

2. This disciplinary dominance persists despite limited inroads by behavioralists or those employing quantitative methods in economics, political science, psychology, sociology and history. Such methodology is *not* invariably incompatible with egalitarian and multiculturalist assumptions or conclusions.

3. Weissberg (1998:33), for example, refers to a 1987 survey in which: “sixty-four percent of the blacks and 40 percent of the whites conjectured that they would be denied permission to arrange a public meeting to protest the government’s wrongful behavior. Even innocuously publishing a pamphlet was perceived as an impermissible activity by 53 percent of black respondents and 28 percent of whites.”

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