

# The Crisis of the Human Sciences



The Crisis of the Human Sciences:  
False Objectivity and the Decline  
of Creativity

Edited by

Thorsten Botz-Bornstein

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P U B L I S H I N G

The Crisis of the Human Sciences: False Objectivity and the Decline of Creativity,  
Edited by Thorsten Botz-Bornstein

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# INTRODUCTION

## THORSTEN BOTZ-BORNSTEIN

Technocratic consciousness reflects not the sundering of an ethical situation, but the repression of ethics as such as a category of life. The common, positivist way of thinking renders inert the frame of reference of interaction in ordinary language, in which domination and ideology both arise under conditions of distorted communication... The reified models of the sciences migrate into the socio-cultural life-world and gain objective power over the latter's understanding. The ideological nucleus of this consciousness is the elimination of the distinction between the practical and the technical. It reflects, but it does not objectively account for the new constellation of the disempowered institutional framework and systems of purposive-rational action that have taken a life on their own.

—Jürgen Habermas, *Erkenntnis und Interesse*, 1968.

There is a lot of talk about crises in the media. The crisis we best remember is the most recent financial crisis commonly referred to as the Great Recession but we are also well acquainted with a whole range of other crises such as the crisis of religion, of society, the oil crisis, the housing crisis, the crisis of education, of the family, of ethics, the environmental crisis... New terms such as “crisis management” or “crisis intervention” appear on a regular basis. As Umberto Eco noted already in 1983: “Crisis sells well” (Eco 1976: 126).

Is there any particular reason to talk about the “Crisis of the Human Sciences?” The Crisis of the Human Sciences is a broad concept, which makes any in-depth exploration difficult. The Crisis of the Human Sciences deals with a crisis in education; some might hold that it deals with a crisis of culture. In any case, the Crisis of the Human Sciences is related to the crisis of science and the role science plays in society. What distinguishes the Crisis of the Human Sciences from all the other crises mentioned is that its subject term refers to a more complex entity composed of two words and not only of one: “human” and “science.” The crisis might reside in one phenomenon or the other, or in both phenomena, or it might reside

in their relationship or in the meaning that both phenomena convey when appearing together.

When hearing of the Crisis of the Human Sciences, most people will think of funding cuts in certain academic fields, of the decline of theory, or of falling numbers of students in some disciplines due to bad job prospects. However, all these parameters are relative and many might hold that the glass is still half full. Indeed, there remain many positive things to say about the human sciences: those students who study these disciplines are remarkably engaged and humanities departments continue offering opportunities for students and teachers to express themselves intellectually and civically. Half a century ago, intellectuals such as Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr. and Lionel Trilling would speak to extremely large audiences, but so do Slavoj Žižek and A.C. Grayling today.

Other people will formulate a scathing criticism attesting that in the world of academia, centralization and over-professionalization are increasingly leading to the disappearance of a critical environment capable of linking academic disciplines to the “real world.” Absurd evaluation processes foster these tendencies and create a sterile atmosphere by preventing interdisciplinarity and creativity. Or they will point out that, due to the centralization of editorial power in the grip of large university presses of Anglophone countries, the content, quality, and range of modern publishing has become more and more predictable.

A further point of criticism is the increasing technicization of theory, which can very easily play into the hands of technocrats. The growth of scientism tends to fragment ethical categories and to distort the discourse between inner and outer selves. In the field of philosophy, for example, many branches suffer from an empty professionalism excelling in ahistorical and nonpolitical exercises often justified through appeals to false excellence. These critics maintain that the human sciences should rather operate in a concrete cultural environment able to influence procedures on a *hic et nunc* basis. They should not entirely depend on normative criteria whose function can too easily become to hide ignorance behind a pretentious veil of value-neutral objectivity.

The present volume reunites scholars working in different fields of the humanities all of whom are responding to what they perceive as a Crisis of the Human Sciences. The authors concentrate on educational problems, on the philosophical foundations of the humanities within the entire building of the sciences, and on economical determinants interfering with the development or simply the survival of the human sciences.

Naturally, the teachers of the human sciences are most concerned with the decline of these disciplines. Most authors in the first section observe

the decline of the educational standard of the student and indicate diverse reasons, among which are social homogenizations spurred onward by the boarder-crossing consumption of products (Gottschalk) or the weakening of the mother tongue of the child which has become unable, due to the overuse of television translations, to master the necessary skills of the classical Arabic language (Satti and Akbar).

The volume has a regionalist emphasis as it deals with many concrete problems apparent in the region of the Arabic Gulf. Stephen Keck, for example, urges Gulf leaders to ponder the long range value of a place which would go beyond vocational education and offer its graduates a broader conception of the world. Kevin Gray points to the decay (or non-existence) of humanities instruction in the modern university in general and particularly in the Gulf. The philosophical foundations of the Crisis of the Human Sciences are examined a reevaluation of the role of philosophy in contemporary culture (Zavaliy). Economic implications of the crisis concern practices of financial officers whose questionability in terms of ethics and professional standards can be revealed only by the human sciences. The latter have “identified issues leading to the collapse of major corporations while the economic sciences [were] actively involved in manipulating financial results and financial positions within the confines of generally accepted practices” (Ankli, Palliam & Awwad). Similar defects – though in an entirely different field – are detected by Helen Lauer who shows that scientific forecasts which predicted the devastation of African countries through AIDS “have not been corroborated by facts on the ground. If the statistics were correct, populations would have plummeted by 2010. Instead, population figures continue to steadily increase in Uganda, Kenya, and South Africa.” Again, this shows the importance of the human sciences as well as the difficulties it has to make itself heard in the contemporary “scientific” environment.



**PART I.**  
**EDUCATION**



# CHAPTER ONE

## SCIENCE, CULTURE, AND THE UNIVERSITY

### THORSTEN BOTZ-BORNSTEIN

The compound term “human sciences” refers to those sciences that examine everything which is not nature. The human sciences examine humans, their histories, their cultures, and their behaviors and can appear in the form of anthropology, sociology, psychology, linguistics, comparative literature, musicology, etc. The task of all sciences, no matter if natural or “human,” is to reveal recurring generalities, to create concepts, and to establish laws and systems. Compared to the natural or “hard” sciences, the human sciences are able to engage in the examination of what remains immeasurable or of the ever changing dynamic present in the phenomena they observe.

Historically, the human sciences are indebted to German historical thought on the one hand, and to the French system of social thought, on the other. At some point, positivists and empiricists like Auguste Comte and John Stuart Mill imposed more exact and scientific standards upon these sciences. By gradually reducing the historical dimension of the human sciences, positivists and empiricists made the human sciences more “superficial,” but also more analytically refined.

### **The Human Sciences and Culture**

The foundations of the human sciences have never been clear. The human sciences are cultural sciences in the twofold sense of the term: they examine culture while being themselves part of a cultural process. Culture is the intrinsically human component that turns these sciences into human sciences. Fernand Braudel found that today we “more naturally tend to call some abominable misdeed a ‘crime against humanity’ rather than against civilization, although both mean much the same thing” (Braudel 1994: 7). Culture is human which is why the Crisis of the Human Sciences is related to a crisis of culture or might even signify a crisis of culture.

But what is culture? Culture is not simply everything which is

man-made because in that case, the natural sciences' scientific productions would be a part of culture too. Though some people adhere to this universal definition of culture, most generally we prefer for this extremely broad range of human activities the term *civilization* and not culture. Roughly speaking, culture is what the human sciences examine while the natural sciences examine nature. Still, the definition of culture is a tricky task that has led, during the last 250 years, to a large number of controversies making any unanimously accepted definition of culture so difficult that I will not even attempt it here. Let me rather quote Matthew Arnold's account not of what culture *is*, but of what he believes culture should *generate*. In *Culture and Anarchy*, which is arguably the most important book on the notion of culture in England, Arnold points out that culture should foster "a fuller harmonious development of our humanity, a free play of thought upon our routine notions, spontaneity of consciousness, sweetness and light" (Arnold 1869: 195).

Things turn out to be even more complicated if we consider that the human sciences do not only *examine* "culture," but that they are also *transmitters* of culture. Today there are even good reasons to argue that the human sciences are the *main* transmitters of culture because religion (at least in Europe), the family, and society are involved in deep crises of their own and have considerable difficulties transmitting culture. Are these difficulties linked to a simple decline of religion, the family, society, and the human sciences or are they linked to a general disinterest in culture? Allan Bloom, in his best-selling book from 1987, *The Closing of the American Mind*, believes that there is a decline of culture, that culture is responsible for its own decline, a decline that will carry away towards its abyss also religion, the family, society, and, finally, the human sciences. This enables him to link the crisis of culture transmission and the crisis of the human sciences to the same root, which is the decline of culture: "The cause of this decay of the family's traditional role as the transmitter of tradition is the same as that of the decay of the human sciences: nobody believes that the old books do, or even could, contain the truth. So books have become, at best, 'culture' i.e., boring" (Bloom 1987: 58). Lionel Trilling, at his time, like Bloom, an extremely popular "human scientist," is of the same opinion and writes about the contemporary "disenchantment of our culture with culture itself" (Trilling 1943: 3).

Any such reasoning equates the Crisis of the Human Sciences with the crisis of culture. *If* we accept this, the next step must be to find reasons for this crisis. There are many options. Some will attribute the crisis of culture to the absurd life style of capitalist consumer societies. Some will point to globalization and its standardization which creates a lack of diversity of

cultural expressions. Some people will put, at last, part of the blame on the influence of scientific methods (readily adopted for the purposes of modern society's "industrialism") when applied to cultural phenomena. The Humanities are about "being human," writes Keyan Tomaselli and "being human cannot be encapsulated in the relative crudity offered by numbers. Being human requires a soul..." (2010: 2). The latter way of reasoning leads us to the question of the human sciences' relationship with science, which is ambiguous to say the least, being locked up in an eternal dilemma.

## The Human Sciences and Science

What relationship do the human sciences have with science? Let us continue Allan Bloom's line of thought and suppose that the human sciences are branches of the body of science attempting to transmit culture (which he believes has become "boring") in a more or less scientific fashion. Is this actually part of the crisis or is "science" the panacea able to solve or mitigate the announced crisis of culture? Many people have argued that the scientific treatment of culture leads to an *evaporation* of culture because it transforms tradition into bits of information. Already Tocqueville saw that "in a democracy tradition is nothing more than information. With the 'information explosion,' tradition has become superfluous" (from Bloom, p. 58). Tocqueville equates culture with tradition, which makes sense in the present context. However, if we equate culture with tradition, it turns out that even the precursor of science, the ever so cultural *philosophy*, has been rather critical of "culture." Plato's ideas of universality and rationality are strictly opposed to local, traditional, or "cultural" truths. For Plato, scientific (philosophical) truth must be universal and should not consider relativistic claims issued by "cultures."

This dilemma becomes a major challenge in the Eighteenth Century as thinkers are facing immense difficulties when trying to reconcile the intellectual acquisitions of Enlightenment with tradition. Immanuel Kant solved the problem perhaps in the most elegant way by avoiding any talk of a "crisis of reason" but by formulating, in a more constructive fashion, an explicit "critique" of reason. For Kant, it does not make sense to speak of a crisis of reason simply because reason cannot be automatically associated with truth. Kant designed particular devices through which abstract (scientific) reason can function within a concrete "cultural" environment by constantly supervising itself. Reason is limited, but if we know how to handle this limitation properly we will never face a crisis of reason. Consequently, we will never face a crisis of culture either.

Today Kant's ideas, as well as the subsequent project of German Humanism to combine Enlightenment with classical human values, might stand out as an ideal model of what the human sciences are supposed to be. We still hear the echoes of these thoughts pounding through contemporary Liberal Arts colleges. In the end, however, even the German thinkers of the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries did not manage to reconcile two phenomena that modernity would conceive as increasingly antagonistic: culture and science.

In the Nineteenth Century, the advance of science, together with industrialism and free-trade, created what Matthew Arnold would call an "industrialism culture" (Arnold, p. 78), that is, a new type of culture clearly opposed to the "free play of thought" or to the "sweetness and light" so dear to Arnold. In the new capitalist economy, traditional literati (in the style of Baudelaire or Zola) will gradually lose the monopoly of intellectual trendsetting. The advent of new middle classes will spell the end of the traditional intelligentsia composed of "generalists" such as philosophers and poets and replace them with "experts" who will rely more and more heavily on methods, hard science, and technology.

From then onward, positions become rather extreme. Culture will see science as its enemy and deem it more and more necessary to limit any scientific invasion into its territory. Skepticism towards positivistic and scientific thinking receives an enormous push during and after World War I in Europe when the belief in "progress" is profoundly shattered. After World War II, the camp of the human sciences has definitely decided to define itself as eternally resistant. Jacques Ellul, in his famous writings from the 1960's, regrets that "technique has taken over the whole of civilization. Death, procreation, birth – all must submit to technical efficiency and systematization" (Ellul 1964: xxv). For Ellul, technique in the sense of a "totality of methods" for achieving efficiency in all fields of human activity is a "coupling of rationalistic thinking (...) and a specific cultural value of efficiency" (128). Here it seems that science is no longer searching for enlightenment able to free humans from ancient constraints, but merely a technique working – blindly and presumably "value-free" – in the service of a restrictive system whose only recognized value is "efficiency."

Some thinkers formulate the problems that emanate from the combination of "scientific" values with "culture" in terms of a "crisis of science," though what is actually meant is a crisis resulting from the sciences' incapacity to deal with culture. Edmund Husserl, in *The Crisis of the European Sciences* (1934-37), explains that the scientific objectivity characteristic of natural sciences (which is a result of the increasing

mathematization of nature) is bound to neglect the subjective, historical, and dynamic part of human life from which science once emerged. Yes, culture subsists, but it is affected by a scientific discourse relatively unable to sustain an idea of “culture” in the Arnoldian sense as “a fuller harmonious development of our humanity” or as the “spontaneity of consciousness.” In the 1970s, Jürgen Habermas defines the problem most aptly by speaking of the elimination of the distinction between the practical and the technical: “The reified models of the sciences migrate into the socio-cultural life-world and gain objective power over the latter’s understanding” (Habermas 1971: 113).

### **The Human Sciences and Values**

If we follow these authors that have been writing about culture and science over a span of one and a half centuries, it turns out that the real danger is not that culture will disappear. The danger is rather that one day its essence will be deprived of its intrinsic values or of its “sweetness and light.” Most probably culture will end up as a hopelessly overstretched notion. Seen through the scientific lens, *everything* can appear as culture. According to Allan Bloom there is “the drug culture, the rock culture, the street-gang culture” (Bloom: 184) which Bloom criticizes as “the lack of culture [which] has become culture.” Bloom’s point might appear as overly conservative but he does indeed raise an important question: Can “cultural values and virtues,” qualities that former “human scientists” had been able to spell out concretely, survive within this concept of culture? Within contemporary discussions of culture, it has become naïve to ask about those values. Clive Bell, in his pre-war works on culture and civilization, would single out civilization as “the flavor given to the self-expression of an age or society by a mental attitude” (1973: 121). Moreover, he would not hesitate to state “tolerance, receptivity, magnanimity, unshockableness, and taste for, and sympathy with pleasure [as] prime characters of civilization” (168). Emerson, in his writings on culture says that civilization is supposed “to bring people to extreme delicacy of sentiment, as in practical power, religion, liberty, sense of honor and taste” (1971: 19). Today, the values that Bell and Emerson still dared to name, appear as too individualistic: they do not fit into any scheme of scientific, “value-free,” universal truths about “culture.” It seems that the only “value” left is the one that Ellul had called the “cultural value of efficiency” plus some general guidelines. Under the x-ray of science, cultural “sweetness and light” disappears leaving only a skeleton called “human rights” or “democracy.” Habermas summarizes this situation by saying that the

“technocratic consciousness reflects not the sundering of an ethical situation, but the repression of ethics as such as a category of life” (1970: 113). This is what constitutes the Crisis of the Human Sciences.

Some people remain adamantly optimistic. In June 2010, the President of the British Academy, Sir Adam Roberts, declared the notion of a two-culture society where the natural sciences vie against the human and social sciences, to be “sterile and outdated.” Roberts is begging the question. How can a crisis that has such deep historical roots and which has been reinforced century after century, decade after decade, suddenly be outdated? Roberts seems to insinuate that both entities have fused or that they are about to fuse. But if that is the case, then this very concept of fusion refers back to the above relationship between the human sciences and natural sciences which represents a problem and not a solution.

## Corporate Culture

In principle, specialization, quantification and formalization, and even the increasing impact of technology on any sort of investigation, do not make a crisis. To believe that it does is to confuse the symptoms of the crisis with its source (cf. Schrag 1980: 9). The crisis consists in the fact that an “industrialist” society treats specialization, quantification, and formalization as an end in itself and thus reduces culture to a skeleton. Unfortunately this tendency has also become current in academia.

About three decades ago, Arnold’s “industrialism culture” began to invade the universities, which also affected human science departments. Arnold Toynbee had complained about the “industrialization of historical thought (1934: 1),” but he could hardly imagine how bad things would become one day. Lewis Gordon has called the prophets of this new academic culture the “academic managerial class” (2006: 9). Among the most outspoken pieces of criticisms of the new academic economism is Frank Donoghue’s book, *The Last Professors*, in which the author explains how “corporate interests and values are poised to overwhelm the ideals of the liberal arts and to transform the university into a thoroughly businesslike workplace” (2008: 1). Lionel Trilling had noticed this tendency already in the 1950s: “More and more, as the universities liberalize themselves, and turn their beneficent imperialistic gaze upon what is called Life Itself, the feeling grows among our educated classes that little can be experienced unless it is validated by some established intellectual discipline, with the result that experience loses much of its personal immediacy and becomes part of an accredited societal activity” (Trilling: 10).

Universities have changed a lot within the last thirty years. In university X, only Coca Cola products can be distributed as a result of contractual agreements. Universities make contracts with brands like Nike, which produce T-Shirts with university logos (made in China). The current salary differentials of faculty inside some universities would be typical for big corporations and used to be unthinkable in institutions of learning. Branding and lobbying has become one of the main academic activities, not to speak of administrative obligations that nobody had ever heard of only ten years ago. Within this world of bureaucratization, transparency, efficiency, productivity, accountability, competition, ranking, over-evaluation of short-term output, and forced specialization, the academic (if we may still call him like that) seems to be playing the role of a zombie. In the departments of “Dead Human Sciences” the living dead are “doing their jobs,” but only few of them continue to manifest the appetite for the breadth of inquiry that typified earlier ventures in academia, nor do they seem to have the time or interest to develop personal intellectual convictions. There is very little, if any, support for true intellectualism and the people who still pursue this are stigmatized as bohemians or poets. Paradoxically, the specialization of scholars drags even the traditional academic monograph into a crisis. Today everybody is supposed to be a “specialist” yet able to write – for commercial reasons – for an audience that exceeds the limits of her field of specialization.

Thorstein Veblen recognized efficiency and productivity as foreign to the human sciences (1899: 95). Now these qualities are imposed upon the academic world in the name of some questionable utilitarianism. Few people seem to remember that the kind of specialization common in the natural sciences as well as in the corporate world contradicts the Socratic idea of wisdom as the most general knowledge of the good. When Matthew Arnold said that to know culture is to know “the best which has been thought and said in the world” (p. viii), his ideal of culture was highly compatible with philosophical knowledge. At present, the human sciences are moving further and further away from it.

## Philosophy

Talking about my own field, philosophy, I should say that this crisis began long before the continental analytical divide and that philosophy has long ago lost the capacity to follow the Socratic idea of wisdom. Other branches of the human sciences fare much better. What *philosophical* idea could actually be more interesting and more powerful than the ideas of Freud and Max Weber? Nietzsche’s perspectivism, Wittgenstein’s ordinary

language, Heidegger's Being, Derrida's *écriture*, or some highly abstract analytical notions? It is here, right before the First World War, that philosophy began to isolate itself even within the field of the human sciences. Afterwards, this process of isolation has been pursued in the most extreme fashion by analytical philosophy while continental philosophy survived much better by fusing with other disciplines of the human sciences. Living an isolated life and being submitted to purely scientific ideals, analytical philosophy can much more easily be integrated into the culture of industrialism. This development is known as the establishment of "philosophy as a profession," which began in the 1920s and 1930s in the Ivy League universities and which is a rather sad chapter indeed.

### **Conclusion**

The human sciences can only subsist if they establish themselves within a clearly defined niche where they can remain distinguished from the natural sciences as well as from the corporate university that is trying to win them over in the name of an industrialist concept of science. This does not mean that they should look only inward and isolate themselves from the world. The right balance between recreation and reinvention is the biggest challenge. Many liberal arts colleges are following this path: trying to remain inspired by a humanist ideal of the university as a privileged place cut off from the constraints of business and everyday politics in which they can enjoy freedom of inquiry and intellectual pluralism. Here the human sciences can continue working on the project to which they are linked by destiny: the reconciliation of culture and science, a project that begins with Socrates and by which philosophy and the human sciences remain defined.