

En Route

The two cultures

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No, I am not talking about East and West, or North and South. I am not talking about Islam or Christianity, not other religions either. I am not talking about urban or rural cultures, rich or poor, or any other of the dichotomies we human beings and social scientists create. To talk about “on the one hand” and “on the other hand”, is a common way of trying to explain and analyze the world. It helps us understanding issues and find out what we think is right and wrong, what is good bad. But we should know that it is a simplification to divide issues into two rather than multiple categories.

Still, in this article, I shall write about the two cultures of the philosophical, historical, cultural and social sciences on the one hand, and on the other hand, the mathematical, engineering, and natural sciences. In our time, we demand that universities shall be utilitarian and teach skills, not just teach students to think and analyze, explore, investigate, and try to make sense of the world we live in. Perhaps we must re-focus on teaching how to think, question and analyze?

Recently, a Pakistani friend reminded me of the importance of not having water-tight walls between the two scientific areas. Kashif, who himself is a telecommunications engineer and management specialist, has already studied two quite different fields. He told me that in Saudi-Arabia, where he is currently working, a provincial governor had explained on a BBC programme that his country had begun sending a large number of professionals to countries in the West for further degrees to be better equipped to replace expatriate staff. That is all good and well, as long as they also know their own country. But then the governor added that they had only sent people from the natural sciences, engineering and other applied fields, not the “thinking sciences”, as I would like to phrase it. The governor thought that Saudi-Arabia has no time for “luxuries”, and to him that was history, philosophy, and other fields within social sciences and the humanities. He didn’t think those fields were important for his country’s development.

Was he right? In certain ways he was because any country, especially a country like Saudi-Arabia, needs skilled labour at high levels, from artisans to professors in engineering and other fields. So it makes sense to train and educate people in those fields. In our technologically advanced time, it is necessary to have highly trained and experienced specialists. In earlier days, it was different, as it still is in many rural areas, especially in developing countries. There, broad general knowledge and artisans skills are needed to fit the local requirements. In urban and industrialized areas, with large cities, higher degrees of specialization is required, and in many cases that even means top university degrees with house jobs, practical training and work experience. In addition, specialists must keep up-dating their competences continuously as new inventions and practices develop.

In the modern industrialized countries high skills are needed everywhere, and in developing countries, they are also needed in the cities and other modern enclaves. In the longer run, the developing countries will become similar to the West. We used to talk about the Asian tigers. Later, the term became the emerging economies and recently, we talk, for example, about a group of countries under the acronym BRICS, notably Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa. They all need a lot of technocrats and specialists. And they all, or most of them, probably think like the Saudi-Arabian governor, who needed technocrats and workers with high skills.

One risk, however, is that even if we have top technocratic experts, they are usually “just” sector experts, who only know a limited field or a segment within that field. The risk is that nobody, or very few, knows the complete sector and the inter-linking between sectors. The economic crisis we are still in was caused by over-reliance on sector specialists, especially in the banking and financial sectors. Specialists didn’t see the problems towering up because they only focused on a little and specialized sub-sector. Maybe laymen and

ordinary people could and should have seen the “bubble about to burst”. But ordinary people, even politicians, were not asked, or the specialists quickly convinced them that they didn’t understand issues because they didn’t possess the technocratic expertise. They were generalists, not specialists, and in our time we don’t believe in such people. In many ways, democracy is waning and technocracy is growing. I would not call it meritocracy because that implies that learned people rule. And that is not the case. A technocrat is a sector-specialist but not a rounded, reasoning and analyzing person, at least not by training and experience, but could be as an individual. He or she is not used to having to take the broader pros and cons into consideration.

That leads me to the “other culture”, notably the philosophical, historical, cultural and social sciences. My thinking engineer friend Kashif wrote recently in an email to mail: “Now I believe that a society without social scientists, historians, painters, philosophers, etc., will be like a body without a soul.” And he is right.

The superstructure of a society is studied and defined by the “thinking sciences”. Literature, poetry, art, music and such creative fields also play important roles. Religion was more important earlier. Political ideologies played more important roles in last century, with communist and socialist ideologies opposing capitalism. After the fall of the Soviet Union over twenty years ago, these ideologies have been on decline, letting capitalism free-wheel, and also relegating our debate about overarching principles and ideologies to “something luxurious”. We have all become very pragmatic and much more selfish. The ideals that we find in religion and philosophy are now seen as less essential by many people.

Well over a generation ago when I was young we read political literature and I recall names like, Ibsen, Strindberg, Soyinka, Achebe, Gordimer, and many more, and we debated world views of people like Ghandi, Nyerere, Castro, Palme, and so on. I was impressed last year when my friend Kashif said he was reading Dostoyevsky. It reminded me of the way we approached and discussed issues and ideologies when I was young. We didn’t just learn skills and applications of new inventions and innovations. We would often be against many new things, too, because we feared they would reduce people’s freedoms. We thought we would become technocrats and robots. In many ways, that is what has happened.

But there are some positive signs on the sky. The social sciences have grown, especially in the West, where scores of students study such subjects, and that also goes for a country like Pakistan. Few major decisions can be made by the government unless they are based on investigation and research reports. Unfortunately, many of the studies are also technocratic and not broad enough, and the social scientists are therefore not utilized to their full potential, and the cultural and philosophical sciences must also be included. Pakistan’s Higher Education Commission has just embarked on a campaign to promote social sciences in the country. That is an important project.

Some say that the “thinking sciences” are not concrete enough. What does an anthropologist know, or a candidate in theology or sociology? What can they do, perhaps except for becoming teachers in their own fields? Even if they have taken development studies and other interdisciplinary fields, they are often pushed aside by engineers and technocrats. Yet, we know that most of our modern problems today are created by the same people. They have created wealth and development. But there have also been growing management problems, with less democracy and greater inequalities. The technocrats’ world economy almost collapsed a few years ago.

I hope that the World Economic Forum, which opened its annual meeting in Davos in Switzerland yesterday with “everybody who counts present”, will discuss some of the issues I have focused on in this article. I hope they will begin to realize that without the thinkers and socially responsible men and women the technocrats will lead us further astray. Growth and technological development is important in some countries. But how much growth do we really need in the West? How come the rich countries can not say that they have enough? What is needed is finding better ways of sharing of resources and work, and we must focus on developing a better social and cultural life for all.

This means that the technocrats should be relegated to less prominence, not because they are unimportant, but because their professions are not meant to coordinate whole societies. To do that, we need the “thinking sciences” and the visionary politicians. We need broad generalists and politicians who can keep questioning and taming the technocrats. They must seek solutions that are good for all. We need the two cultures.

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