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Harper adds sociology to list of sciences that get short shrift

April 30, 2013 - 11:14pm ROBERT BRYM AND HOWARD RAMOS

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During a news conference last week in the wake of the foiled plot to blow up a Via Rail train, Prime Minister Stephen Harper said, "This is not a time to commit sociology."

Why not? Why does the prime minister consider it an offence or perhaps a sin to use sociology to help shed light on the roots of terrorism or, for that matter, other pressing problems in contemporary society?

Part of Mr. Harper's thinking is that in the face of disaster and terror, many people just want to hear a strong voice of reassurance and authority. The other part is more sinister: If you probe the roots of terrorism or other problems, you might come to the conclusion that Conservative party "solutions" are suspect. It follows that thinking sociologically is to be avoided at all costs.

Consider the well-documented sociological finding that the measurable demographic and socio-cultural characteristics of people can't predict whether they will become radicalized and engage in terrorist acts. Much of the impetus for suicide bombing comes instead from a desire to retaliate against what are perceived as repressive actions on the part of foreign powers.

Yet the Conservative government is now investing a lot of money to compile information on the demographic and socio-cultural characteristics of people with connections to terrorist groups. The hope is that this information, properly analyzed, will tell us more about what kinds of people to keep an eye on. Sociological research suggests that this is probably not an efficient use of funds.

The government (and Canadians) would be better off to invest that money in good police work and a vigorous public debate about whether Canadian foreign policy is contributing to the kind of repression in foreign lands that incites terrorism.

Sociology, and science more generally, help to solve many of the most pressing problems facing the world. However, members of the Conservative government continue to intone the most famous line from W.H. Auden's satirical Reactionary Tract for Modern Times: "Thou shalt not sit with statisticians nor commit a social science."

Notable examples: The Conservatives pulled the plug on the census. Federal government

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scientists complain they are being muzzled. Federal librarians have been issued a code of conduct constraining their participation in conferences and public events.

Mr. Harper shut down the world-renowned freshwater research station in Northern Ontario because its investigations into the effects of global warming on marine life don't suit Conservative policies.

Environmental deregulation triggered widespread protest by Idle No More and may lead to the demise of fragile ecosystems. Economic deregulation has led to an influx of temporary foreign workers, many working for less than standard wages. This depresses the income of Canadian workers and prevents unemployed Canadians from finding work.

Canada was once known internationally for sound evidence-based policy. Current comments by the prime minister suggest we are now on the path to policy-based evidence.

Increasingly, facts are ignored, suppressed or distorted to suit government ideology. Doing otherwise has become an offence.

EDITOR'S NOTE: Robert Brym is professor of sociology at the University of Toronto. His recent research focuses on suicide bombing and state-directed assassination. Howard Ramos is associate professor of sociology at Dalhousie University. His recent research focuses on social movements and, with Karen Stanbridge, he published Seeing Politics Differently.

About the Author »

ROBERT BRYM and HOWARD RAMOS

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Sciences are too intellectual for Harper. It could lead to lower crime rates and even the perception that he has created with crime rising. Therefore Mega Prisons, which even the United States has told us does not work, would not get built by his cronies in the Corporate world.

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FedUp • 3 days ago

I would imagine Harper would be more into television shows like Duck Dynasty ... or a book like Preston Manning and the Reform Party. Science only opens up the opportunity for his followers to think outside the box.

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Knowing the alleged 'root causes' of the Boston bombing will not stop further bombings. Paying heed to the warnings from the Russians would have been more worthwhile.

You don't need a census to know where poor people live - all the information is obtainable from income tax returns. We need politicians who will look beyond 'the middle class' but such politicians are no longer to be found.

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Trailmac > roy rogers · 3 days ago

More thought required on roots causes. We can't just look in the mirror to consult the nearest expert, as today's cartoon seems to suggest.

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roy rogers > Trailmac · 3 days ago

In the article the writers refer to " whether Canadian foreign policy is contributing to the kind of repression in foreign lands that incites terrorism " which seems to indicate that residents Canada who disagree with our policies can use their disapproval as an excuse for acts of terror. Western democracies have a long history of changing policies through the use of the ballot box, not the bomb or bullets.

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Bruce Conway > roy rogers · 3 days ago

Some use Diebold voting machines, or Robocalls.

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Gondorf > roy rogers · 3 days ago

ridiculous.....American/British foreign policy?..are you telling me its not about bombs and bullets ...!!!!

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bro tim > roy rogers · 3 days ago

Actually the leadership of most terrorist groups come from well to do backgrounds and grew up with privilege. They will abuse and use the poor and use them as shields. Afterall the poor cannot afford arms and weapons.

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fracker · 3 days ago

The social engineers have made it impossible for the west to face the islamist threat head on due to political correctness. The root cause is an ideology opposed to our western values of free will and free speech. I invite you to look to

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Britain or even Toronto to see our future if we continue to ignore this threat.

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Peter Halifax > fracker · 3 days ago

The biggest threat Canada faces?

"The incidents catalogued in the "secret" report include attacks on Alberta oil pipelines and three bombings by a Quebec group called the Initiative de Résistance Internationaliste (IRI) that espouses a broad leftist agenda."

<http://news.nationalpost.com/2...>

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Gondorf > fracker · 3 days ago

they are opposed to our freedom and western values? Brilliant!

2  | 1  Share ›



Ms, Biz · 3 days ago

Interesting, insightful, and important article. I wonder if Brym and Ramos are familiar with psychotherapist Dr. Bell's analysis of his pathology :

<http://www.vancouverobserver.c...> Also an insightful piece.

6  | 3  Share ›



.RSY · 3 days ago

Someday science and common sense will once again prevail leaving Mr. Harper's dominionism to follow the way of the dinosaurs - better days indeed.

19  | 3  Share ›



FedUp · 3 days ago

The root cause for attacks or the planning of attacks on Canada can in part be related to the snuggling up to a war-mongering neighbour. The days of the respected Canadian peace keeper are gone, the days of sewing the Canadian flag on a knapsack to gain respect (and not be a target) are gone Canada now flies war planes into other countries and lets the bombs and missiles fly.

As a Canadian I don't want my country known as the little Satan in extremist circles.

13  | 3  Share ›



pensive > FedUp · 3 days ago

It's OK FedUp ... it's a special day ... relax.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v...>

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Peter Halifax > FedUp · 3 days ago

"As a Canadian I don't want my country known as the little Satan in extremist circles"

The progressive way - Political Appeasment - and what lessons have people learned, not learned or in some cases forgotten?

"Appeasement in a political context, is a diplomatic policy of making political or material concessions to a dictatorial power (or powers) in order to avoid a threatened conflict"

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/A...>

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Gondorf > Peter Halifax · 3 days ago

..what does "appeasement" have to do with the issue????

We have been at war for 12 yearswhere is he appeasment????

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Bruce Conway · 3 days ago

Assuming it is still legal to commit unpremeditated sociology in a public place, a famous fellow once said that one of the better ways to prevent terrorism is to stop committing it oneself. In some cases, we don't want the root causes - they're just too embarassing for the country purportedly doing the looking.

6 | 2 Share ›



ehippern · 3 days ago

As a Christian I make note that Christ was very much a socialist. Do unto others

6 | 2 Share ›



Kynikos · 3 days ago

Sociology is not a science. A science is physics, chemistry, geology, biology, etc. Math is the language of measurement in science.

Sociology is a leftist mish-mash of soft topics in the humanities and social studies. It may or may not have oriinal topics that aren't covered in history, religion, political 'science' (another non-science), economics, and so on, but it's hardly science. It's opinion.

I understand sociology struggles for legitimacy. Trying to co-opt the word science may help in some people's minds I guess.

5 | 4 Share ›



Ms, Biz > Kynikos · 3 days ago

It is a social science. So is Economics. They are also sometimes called "soft sciences" because the factor of the human element renders results highly variable.

Capitalism as one theory of Economics, believes it has accounted for the human element with their "invisible guiding hand of the markets", and tends to ignore the realities of the social implications.

Sociology does include history, among other scientific disciplines. It is the study of human interaction and social structures, like political or religious institutions, as well as looks at social values, standards of living, etc...

If Sociology is just an opinion, than so is economics. It would be more accurate to say that interpretations vary, but the same thing occurs in



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