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Scientific Blind Spots: Did Philosophy of Science and Religious Belief Cause Canada's Debt?

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Introduction

The burgeoning literature on Canada’s national debt has failed to address two possible causes of the growth of government debt, namely, philosophy of social science and the religious beliefs of Canadians. This paper argues that the modernist philosophy of science that influenced many scientific studies of Canada’s debt systematically excluded consideration of economic, social, and political demands as well as deliberation on human accountability as intrinsic causes of the growth of debt. The paper argues that the political and economic actors, who utilised the studies shaped by this modern philosophy of science, were encouraged by this approach to think the debt arose and could be solved without directly addressing the accountability of particular persons and institutions for their actions and demands. Once evaluation of accountability and demands is readmitted into the scientific analyses of the debt, the expanded field of vision allows us to see that religious beliefs may also have been an important, unexplored cause of the national debt.

The influence of a mechanistic philosophy of science

Social scientists have generated vast bodies of academic and popular literature on the causes of the Canadian national debt. The debate over the origins of the national debt remains sharply divided between three major categories of causal explanations. The first set of explanations identifies the cause of the national debt as the failure to maintain sufficient government revenue. This set of interpretations argues that the growth of debt was the result of reduced government income caused by lowering tax rates, opening tax loopholes, and/or implementing various tax expenditures.¹ Set against this argument is a set of explanations suggesting that high levels of government program expenditures were the primary cause. The debt resulted because government expenditures outgrew fiscal resources.² A third set of explanations, developed at least in part in reaction to the polarised arguments of inappropriate government expenditures and/or income,
focuses on the impact of high interest rates. These arguments tend to acknowledge problems on the government’s income side but identify the high interest rates used to remedy inflation as the real cause of Canada’s burgeoning debt.3

Rather than attempting to resolve this stand off, this article explores two blind spots evident in all three categories of causal explanations. The first blind spot is linked to Alain-G. Gagnon’s observation that social science has had a powerful influence on policy making. He states the following:

It was when the state took on a whole new range of functions such as macroeconomic redistribution and other forms of sociopolitical engineering to promote public welfare that the demand for social scientific knowledge on societal conditions and the impact of intervening in them was generated. Thus, the impact of social science on policy is very much a question associated with the emergence of the welfare state in the capitalist democracies after World War II.4

The era in which Canada’s debt grew (1970-1995) falls directly in this post-World War II period, raising the question of whether the social sciences themselves may have contributed to the rise of the national debt. More specifically, is there something about the nature of causal explanation in the social sciences that may have imparted this growth? In Beyond Poverty and Affluence: Towards a Canadian Economy of Care, Bob Goudzwaard and Harry de Lange argue that the character of modern economic science is itself one of the key reasons for our failure to understand and solve a variety of paradoxical contemporary dilemmas including poverty, unemployment, and environmental degradation.5 While their study does not directly focus on Canada’s debt, it suggests the novel hypothesis that philosophy of science may have influenced its growth.

Goudzwaard and de Lange argue that a mechanistic and deterministic philosophy of science began to shape economic science in the nineteenth century. The newly adopted method of achieving certain and value-free economic knowledge, Goudzwaard and de Lange argue, required economic scientists to “work out of, or expel from, the study of economics all economic changes that contained the seeds of uncertainty. [Economists] needed to arrive at the point where all that remains for analysis and
explanation is what is certain and what one can make positive statements about."8

The nineteenth-century economists proceeded to expel a wide range of human concerns from their field of study. Two of these concerns are particularly relevant to the nature of social science analyses of Canada’s debt. First, economists should make no judgements about the value of particular economic needs. All human economic needs, desires, and pursuits must be treated equally as given data. Needs provide the straightforward point of departure from which economists calculate how best to fulfil these needs efficiently.9 Second, economists must expel from their field of study all concern for economic accountability.10 Individuals, organizations, and entrepreneurs must be treated like objects that react to facts and processes in a presupposed manner. As a consequence, economists no longer asked who caused the change, but rather what certain economic things or processes—e.g., slow economic growth or inflation—are setting in motion in the economy. The discipline of economics, therefore, no longer believed that it was necessary or even possible to assign responsibility for economic damages to real economic actors. Economists refused to assign the cause of economic problems, such as the national debt, to particular persons, organizations, businesses, or unions.

Banishing from the field of study of social sciences all judgements on the value of particular needs and of human accountability produced serious consequences. Bob Goudzwaard explores two consequences in “Who Cares? Poverty and the Dynamics of Responsibility.”11 First, the social sciences began to reduce people to objects that could only react to external impulses, not act independently. This view is still common in most mainstream social sciences. Second, not only the deciding human persons but the context in which they make decisions was increasingly conceptualised as mechanical and deterministic. In this conceptual universe, causes are believed to mechanically impact re-actors. The science of economics, Goudzwaard argues by way of example, ended up creating a mechanistic laboratory situation called the “market mechanism.” He states,

[I]n this self-created world, no one will ever ask the question: Who or which agency has caused that phenomenon? For the only accepted question is: What factor has caused this event? Within a mechanical universe, no person or agent can be responsible or accountable. Everyone’s behaviour is presupposed to be stereotypical, to be always the same if other factors are constant (the so-called ceteris paribus clause).12

Goudzwaard concludes that in this hypothetical laboratory situation, a social scientist can no longer talk about deeper human causes if one is confronted with a concrete socio-economic problem. The problem has to be taken as it is, as it presents itself now, specifically as a disturbance in the working of the mechanism. Either it will solve itself, if the (mechanical) laws of nature are permitted to operate, or it can be solved by taking the best and most efficient engineering approach to redress it (just as a car is repaired). The mechanistic world, therefore, is not only a world without moral good and evil. It is in fact also a world without a real history.13

If the distortions resulting from the widespread adoption of this modernist philosophy of science were restricted to the academy, there would be little cause for concern by policy makers. However, as Alain-G. Gagnon notes, social science has deeply influenced politics since World War II.14 Ideas matter tremendously in political and economic practice. The eminent economist, J.M. Keynes, also made this claim:

[T]he ideas of economists and political philosophers, both when they are right and when they are wrong, are more powerful than is commonly understood. Indeed the world is ruled by little else. Practical men, who believe themselves to be quite exempt from any intellectual influences, are usually the slaves of some defunct economist. Madmen in authority, who hear voices in the air, are still distilling their frenzy from some academic scribbler of a few years back.15

When human agents use mechanistic and deterministic economics and social sciences to guide their everyday choices, they are encouraged to misread reality and to make skewed and distorted decisions. In their analysis, Goudzwaard and de Lange conclude that this philosophy of science leads to public policies that in practice “usually attack only the symptoms, not the real cause of economic misdoing.”16 It has led economists and policy makers to misinterpret the real world and the central questions of social, political, and economic “misdoing,” namely, “who shapes what and on behalf of whom.”17
The three categories of explanations for the national debt, introduced above, deal with real and important causes. On a deeper level, however, they fail to identify the central questions of cause. Obviously, annual deficits and accumulated debts are the result of governments that either spend too much or raise too little revenue. Furthermore, once a government is carrying a large debt, a high interest rate policy will undoubtedly lead to its growth. What these explanations fail to answer are the underlying questions of who made these decisions, on behalf of whom, and why? In order to answer these questions, normative evaluation must be reintegrated into causal scientific explanations. Why did many Canadians demand more services from government while insisting on tax cuts? Why did the Canadian Government choose to overspend? Why did it not opt to raise more revenue? Why did government go along with a policy of high interest rates? Who influenced the policy makers to act as they did? Why were so many other economic agents—functioning within corporations, banks, unions, and consumer groups—willing to go along with this policy of high deficits and ballooning national debt? What were the religious beliefs that guided these accountable agents? What did they believe about social and economic life, the role of material wealth in human wellbeing, the nature of the market, and the role of the state in society and the market? Social scientific studies that ignore these questions may encourage the development of policies that are inappropriate, unjust, or simply wrong. In this way, the modernist version of philosophy of science may have played an important role in causing the national debt.

**The case of the high interest rate policy**

Gordon Thiessen, former Governor of the Bank of Canada, illustrated remarkably the policy-making mentality created by a mechanistic and deterministic worldview in economics when reacting to media questions about the widespread trend of profitable corporations to engage in massive layoffs. Thiessen responded that the changes in the character of work and lost jobs “are part of a necessary process of change that will result in a more vigorous Canadian economy.” He implied that these layoffs were simply adjustments to signals from the global marketplace and directly related them to the ups and downs of interest rates and the dollar. His statement failed to address any of the responsible persons who made the choices in a wide variety of banks, corporations, investment firms, unions, and households that were interpreted together as “market forces,” as well as the religious beliefs that guided these responses to these so-called “market signals.”

The Bank of Canada, of course, is a key policy institution implicated in the argument that high interest rates caused the national debt. The Bank, run as it is by people schooled in the science of economics, has often been quick to cloak itself in the mantle of objective science. The Bank claims to be a technical adjustment institution responding to market signals. The Bank and its officials claim they should not be blamed for its fiscal policies because they are necessary reactions to external market forces. High interest rates that doubled the national debt were simply mechanical adjustments required to rebalance the market. The Bank of Canada officials behave, and are treated by others, as though they are automatons reacting to external stimuli.

This view of the Bank of Canada’s role in the national debt assumes that the mechanistic and deterministic worldview adopted by the social sciences is . . . an accurate portrayal of real life.
Canadian economy off balance. These officials, guided in their selection of policy instruments by the mechanistic assumptions derived from the social sciences, decided to implement a scheme of high interest rates in order to rebalance the economy. In reacting to perceived signals, far too little attention was paid to who benefited and who lost.

To take this point a step further, the Bank’s attack on the so-called factor of inflation was really a reaction to symptoms rather than to the real causes. Inflation and unemployment are real, but they do not exist as independent forces that act in mechanistic ways apart from responsible human agents. Inflation, for example, is the result of the wide variety of choices that responsible human agents make as they engage in all types of beneficial and destructive economic practices. After all, real, acting human persons demand more pay, higher levels of consumer goods, larger profits, and higher investment returns. Policy solutions to the national debt need to get beyond symptoms and directly address human agents, both in the sense of contextual social and economic actors and institutions, as well as in the sense of responding political actors. These actors are the real causes behind high interest rates and the growth of the national debt.

Mechanistic philosophy of science in political theories

The modern philosophy of science shaping economics has also influenced the fields of political science and policy studies as they decided to strive to become truly scientific disciplines. A number of theories and approaches within these fields—the general idea of factor analysis in the social sciences as well as specific theories such as public choice theory and pluralist theory—have been used to explain the national debt. This literature has been consumed, in turn, by a wide variety of politicians, bureaucrats, interest groups, and citizens.

Factor analysis

Most social science studies that utilise factor analysis share the modern philosophy of science assumptions of economics. Study after study on the national debt identifies things, processes, forces, or classes as the factors that have increased the debt. In “The Growth of Government Spending,” for example, David R. Cameron does a cross-national analysis of the causes of government growth. Cameron seeks to “determine whether, and if so to what extent, electoral politics and political institutions contributed to the expansion of the public economy.” He concludes that the political factors of “occurrence of elections,” “the identity of the Prime Minister,” and “frequency of control of government by leftist parties” were either irrelevant or had only a small impact on the growth of government. More important were “non-political sources of growth,” Cameron suggests, such as “the deterioration of the economy and the rise of unemployment.” While Cameron’s approach offers important information about the debt, he limits his analysis to what certain factors set in motion relative to the growth of government and fails to identify who caused this growth to occur and what motivated them to do so.

A factor analysis approach to social science focuses on forces and factors as the causes of the national debt while leaving politicians, union leaders, consumers, bankers, and business people free of responsibility for the nature of their demands and the character of their actions. Governments and policy makers that absorb these types of social science approaches are encouraged to focus on causal factors in a mechanistic and deterministic manner. This objective view of social science generates policy prescriptions that adjust various factors in the hope of moving the economic, social, or political mechanisms towards a more favourable equilibrium. This approach absolves real politicians, political parties, citizens, business people, unions, and consumers of their accountability for encouraging the growth of the national debt.

Public choice theory

It comes as no surprise that public choice theory, or rational choice, is also implicated in utilising a mechanistic and deterministic philosophy of science, since public choice “represents the colonization of traditional political science concerns by economics.” On one level, public choice theory introduces the dilemmas present in economic science in its definition of the person. By interpreting the person as essentially a rational self-interest calculator who goes about life trying to maximise his or her self-interest, public choice reduces the human person to a reacting automaton. On another level,
public choice theory shares the mechanical image of the universe held by many economists. People react to external stimuli from the incentive structures that make up the particular games in which they operate, e.g., the political, special interest group, or bureaucratic games.

As a consequence of these two assumptions, public choice theory ultimately fails to hold anyone accountable for policy outcomes. A politician who runs up the national debt in order to please constituents and to get re-elected is interpreted as simply reacting out of rational self-interest to external democratic forces. Citizens who demand more government spending are simply understood to be pursuing their immediate self-interests. Prescriptive policies advanced by public choice theorists often tend to impose technical adjustments to the incentive structures so that individuals—voters, politicians, bureaucrats, and interest groups—react in such a way as to eliminate the debt. In so doing, however, public choice theory misdirects the attention of policy makers to symptoms and fails to encourage them to question the validity of the needs, values, and desires of the various actors or to hold these actors accountable for their choices. In public choice theory, causality is reduced to determinism within a fixed mechanical field of action, making a caricature of the independence of human actors and of our all-to-human, meaning-laden societal context.

**Pluralist theory**

The political theory of pluralism, which has frequently been used in the social sciences to explain the origin of the national debt, is also shaped by this modern philosophy of science. Classical pluralist theory argues that society is composed of autonomous individuals who are free to choose and value as they will. These individuals voluntarily form interest groups in order to persuade government to serve their interests. Since individuals have many and changing interests, they participate in a wide variety of different and shifting groups in accordance with their evolving interests. Pluralist theory identifies government action and policy as the outcome of interest group competition. The government reacts to the demands of various interest groups and as a good broker, produces an appropriate policy compromise. According to pluralist theory, public interest policies spontaneously emerge from private interest competition.

In “The Politics of the Deficit,” David A. Wolfe uses a version of pluralist theory to analyse the causes of the national debt. Although a large part of the deficit in the 1970s had been caused by cyclical economic factors, he argues, “most of the remainder results from the failure of governments to balance their revenue-raising capacity with the growth of public expenditures.” Why did this imbalance occur? The Liberal Party, Wolfe argues, held onto office for most of the post-war years through “its ability to balance the competing claims of the broad political constituencies from which it drew its electoral support.”

These two major constituencies were the nation’s business class and the large segment of the population directly interested in the Liberals’ social programs. Wolfe identifies the cause of federal deficits in the 1970s as the failure of Liberal governments to collect adequate revenues while balancing the political desires of their corporate support-base with the political preferences of their other social-program supporters. Thus, Wolfe concludes the following:

The political constituencies of the Liberal party have been strongly resistant to allowing increases in the effective level of taxation commensurate with the increases that occurred in levels of direct spending. The Liberal party had risked alienating a substantial portion of its business and upper income constituencies with what were perceived as overly generous transfer programs and a disastrous attempt at comprehensive tax reform. The price of repairing the political damage was a steady stream of tax concessions intended to reassure private enterprises and upper income individuals that the cost of the welfare state in Canada would not fall on their shoulders. Herein lie the political roots of the structural component of the deficit.
It is not clear whether Wolfe considers his theory to be prescriptive or simply descriptive. Nevertheless, pluralist theorists are implicitly prescriptive when they argue that the national debt is, as are all policy outcomes, a semi-automatic government reaction to the evolving context of competing interest-group demands. Various citizens and interest groups democratically demand tax cuts, tax expenditure, or additional programs. The government reacts to these demands by producing a compromise set of policies that achieves as many of the relevant demands as possible while ensuring re-election. While many interest groups and politicians were democratically satisfied by this policy-making process, an unintended and unfortunate consequence of the combined policies was a series of government deficits and a progressively larger national debt.

Thus, the pluralist theory of interest-group politics also accepts both philosophy-of-science assumptions of modern economics. First, the expressed needs and demands of interest groups are not questioned by scientists but treated simply as data. Pluralist theory portrays government and politicians as largely reacting to electoral stimuli and interest-group demands in order to devise the most efficient policy possible. Political practitioners and others who consume pluralist theories are given the impression that government should not assess the quality and value of interest group demands nor should government consider the unregistered demands of weak and powerless groups. Pluralist theory implicitly tells politicians that they are excused from assessing the quality and importance of private interest-group demands from the point of view of the government’s public-interest task.

Second, pluralist theory accepts the philosophy of science assumption that government ought to focus on what causes the debt, e.g., democracy, while absolving the whom of high income earners, Liberal cabinet Ministers, and others of responsibility for their choices. Pluralist theory fails to identify the real agents—in each of their specific offices—who are accountable for actions that cause the national debt. By trying to explain the debt without addressing accountability, pluralist theory maintains its deterministic and mechanical view of persons and the world. Pluralist theory does not encourage us to ask whether institutions and organizations were acting responsibly when costs that rightfully belong to them are externalized to government. It does not encourage government actors to demand that institutions and organizations consider the public consequences of their private decisions. Consequently, non-governmental actors are permitted to shift problems and costs into the public realm under the guise of interest-group demands, thereby expanding the government’s tasks and often increasing its debt load. A corporate decision to lay off employees in order to enhance the value of their stock, for example, increases the employment insurance and welfare costs of government and could potentially make the national debt grow.

Some pluralist theorists have gone beyond description to prescribe policy solutions intended to rebalance the political and economic machines. Yair Aharoni argues, for example, that democracies often experience “demand overload” and prescribes countervailing legislation to balance the democratic demands of the people. This approach has led to a number of mechanical solutions for government debt, such as the much-heralded balanced budget bills and constitutional amendments. This mechanical type of solution, however, fails to encourage government, interest groups, and citizens to fulfil their respective responsibilities and critically examine their demands.

In summary, modern philosophy of science has caused a blind spot in the social science literature on the causes of the debt. Modern philosophy of science has led to social science studies that exclude normative evaluation of economic and political demands and downplay the accountability of various political and economic agents. Informed by this type of scientific analysis, politicians, corporate managers, investors, unions, and consumers were likely to take decisions that contributed to the increase of the national debt. A measure of accountability for the growth of the national debt, therefore, should go to social scientists who produced theories and studies of the national debt based on this modernist philosophy of science. In order to remedy this problem, social scientists must increasingly produce causal explanations that include normative evaluation of who rather than simply what is responsible for causing the growth of the national debt.

**Religious beliefs as a cause of the national debt**

Recognizing the blind spot produced by modern
philosophy of science exposes a second, closely related blind spot. What were citizens, corporations, associations, and unions thinking and believing when they demanded more and more from the federal government? What religious beliefs generated the demands that drove government into deficit-financed programming? Goudzwaard and de Lange’s approach to the study of the paradoxical problem of general scarcity offers a fruitful model for identifying and analysing these deeper assumptions and religious beliefs.

The first step in identifying core values, Goudzwaard and de Lange argue, is to identify the paradoxical characteristics defining a contemporary problem and that seem to make it resist commonly accepted remedies. The paradox of general scarcity, for example, refers to society’s simultaneous experience of unmet desires and demands while living in a time and place of unprecedented wealth. While all societies have experienced critical shortages of certain goods from time to time, our society is unique in that it experiences an ongoing sense of general scarcity. Our needs constantly out-grow our economic means. As production grows to meet increasing wants, our needs expand even more rapidly and therefore we experience general scarcity. Goudzwaard and de Lange observe that “Needs in society have become floating and weightless, as if possessing no gravity. We no longer anchor them in what we truly need; instead, we allow them to be defined by an economic process that requires needs in order to continue functioning.”33 This deep feeling of general scarcity leads consumers, businesses, organizations of all types, as well as governments, to slash essential expenditures and/or run deficits. In this light, Canada’s national debt—as well as more recent severe government program and expenditure cuts—incurred during an era of immense economic prosperity, are clear signs that the paradox of general scarcity has come to characterize Canadian society.

**Five explanations of general scarcity**

The second step in identifying religious beliefs, Goudzwaard and de Lange argue, is to explore the various explanations for why we feel this paradox. In the case of the paradox of general scarcity, they suggest five overarching explanations.34 I have adapted these to more directly illustrate the linkage to national debt.

The first explanation for the paradox of general scarcity identifies advertising as the cause for our artificially expanded needs and desires. Canadian society is on an advertising-induced treadmill of growing wants and desires. We gladly run up debts in order to meet these advertising-induced needs. While this account has significant merit, it is flawed in that it suggests people are largely reactive and therefore unable to escape external influences.

A second explanation focuses on the role of time in creating a sense of scarcity. It takes time to buy, use, and repair possessions. The wealthier we are in possessions, therefore, the less time we have. We respond to this lack of time by borrowing money to consume still more new labour- and time-saving devices that we hope will allow us to get on with more important matters. These devices save time only temporarily, however, since as our devices accumulate, the process of buying, using, and repairing them eventually swallows up the very time they were meant to redeem.

The social explanation of Rene Girard constitutes a third explanation of the paradox of general scarcity. A trademark of all societies, Girard argues, is that “one person desires things because another already has them or wants them.”35 Western society’s unique solution to this universal phenomenon is to increase production and promise to fulfil all desires. Endless material desire is supposed to be solved, therefore, by endless economic growth. To maintain our position in society, we gladly borrow to consume more. Girard despairs, however, since this means “the end will never come.”

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The fourth explanation is based on Hannah Arendt’s analysis of the human condition. Arendt argues that general scarcity is rooted in “a desire by modern humanity to escape from the earth,” that is, from the “human condition.”36 This escape involves transcending three circumstances: social life in its plurality, the human relationship with the earth, and the human relationship to time. These three conditions are increasingly viewed by our society “not as that which forms the substance of life but as restrictions that interfere with our desires.” Arendt’s explanation means that the explosion of means designed to satisfy our ever-rising material desires is “a sign of a titanic battle against the human condition itself.” This battle requires us to go in debt, personally and nationally. Goudzwaard and de Lange draw this conclusion:

Donning the mask of realism, our economic order has mounted the most idealist live performance that this world has ever seen, which casts heavy shadows not only over the environment and the increasingly impoverished Third World, but also over Western humanity itself. For the more affluent we become, the more we alienate ourselves from our own created human condition.37

Goudzwaard and de Lange propose a fifth and deeper explanation of the paradox of general scarcity. General scarcity is the result of not only a desire to escape the human condition but also ultimately a desire to escape God as creator of humanity. As such, general scarcity is rooted in core religious beliefs. In place of God, they argue, Canadians idolize economic growth, aided by science and technology, as the means to deliver and ensure human progress. It is this belief that inspires weightless wants and deep rebellion against nature. But our gods of economic growth, science, and technology have been unable to fulfil our dreams. Instead, they have lured us onto an endless treadmill of wants and debt without any possibility of achieving enough or finding peace with our natural embeddedness in time, nature, and society. Goudzwaard and de Lange conclude, “Our culture faces the dilemma of choosing which god it will serve and which accompanying lifestyle it will follow.”38

Faith in economic growth

Goudzwaard and de Lange’s five explanations of general scarcity raise fascinating questions about the religious beliefs of Canadians, those who directly ran up the national debt and those who presented the demands that led to the government’s deficit. In the deepest sense, we might ask, is the national debt a symptom of a core belief many Canadian citizens, consumers, corporations, unions, and governments hold that suggests we can save ourselves through ever-increasing economic growth?39 In fact, many politicians and economists in Canada have frequently defended this belief, arguing that increased economic growth is a non-negotiable means of solving all of our serious social, economic, and environmental problems and of achieving the goal of human progress. It is noteworthy, Goudzwaard and de Lange argue, that the promise that ever increasing economic growth can solve our problems and produce ever greater human happiness is based on several unproven assumptions that classical economists overtly accept and promote. These assumptions include the following: happiness is something we can earn, happiness lies directly in the amount of goods and services produced and sold in the market, and “the less work we do the better off we are.”40 In order for the promise embedded in these assumptions to be realized, an additional assumption is required, namely that the market must be left unrestrained.41 This assumption also involves the ideas that the market must be left to operate free of government interference; Third World countries must be open for business and adopt a free-market economy in order to progress; and “when we allow the market to do its sovereign work, then every poor person has the opportunity to get out of poverty.”42

Goudzwaard and de Lange’s identification of these religious beliefs of Canadian society suggests a compelling explanation for why Canada’s national debt mushroomed between 1970-1995. The abrupt reversal by Canadian governments on the efficacy of deficits for ensuring economic growth, however, seems to contradict this thesis. Does the current emphasis on program cutbacks, tax reductions, and minimizing the size of government in order to eliminate deficits constitute a reversal of these religious beliefs? In fact, this reversed position on debt leaves the core values of progress and economic growth intact, and only questions the instrumental value of deficits and certain government programs in achieving the goal of human progress. Our deepest beliefs, goals, and assumptions remain intact in this post-deficit era; we have simply changed our minds on
Conclusion

This paper has identified two blind spots in the social-science literature on Canada’s national debt. Modern philosophy of science has shaped many scientific studies of the debt in such a way that they fail to identify the character of economic, social, and political demands as well as human accountability as potential causes of the national debt. This article concludes that if accountability and religious beliefs are readmitted into scientific analysis of the debt, this expanded range of vision will allow social scientists to explore additional causes of the national debt, including religious core values. Identifying two blind spots in the current analyses of the debt does not constitute an alternative explanation for the debt. They are identified simply in order to contribute towards the development of a more fully human explanation of the national debt, an explanation that enables people to act responsibly in both eliminating the debt and maintaining just and caring social and environmental programs.

ENDNOTES


2. See John McCullum, “Debt Policy and Debt History,” Policy Options June (1994), 37-40; and popular arguments raised by, for example, the former Reform Party/Canadian Alliance, The Fraser Institute, and Premier Ralph Klein.


6. Ibid., 52-4; Alan Storkey, Foundational Epistemologies in Consumption Theory (Amsterdam: Free University Press, 1993), 1-43.

7. Storkey, Foundational Epistemologies, 22.

8. Goudzwaard and de Lange, Beyond Poverty and Affluence, 53.

9. Ibid., 54.

10. Ibid., 56-7; Two other concerns expelled from the domain of economic science, Goudzwaard and de Lange argue, were (a) care for nature and the environment which is treated like data, as an input into economic production (55-6), and (b) human labour which loses its intrinsic value and is reduced to paid work (58-9).


12. Ibid., 55.

13. Ibid., 64.


16. Goudzwaard and de Lange, Beyond Poverty and Affluence, 57.

17. Ibid., 119.


19. It is noteworthy that activists and others often use “value-free scientific analyses” but, in practice, turn
the “what” arguments into accusations against “who,” i.e., particular people and institutions. This is so, I believe, because our everyday knowledge correctly tends to blame real people and institutions when social things go wrong. In a personal conversation, Goudzwaard also noted that the notion of personal responsibility is still a primary principle of criminal law.


21. Ibid., 47.

22. Andrew C. Janos argues that the modern political science paradigm assumes a deterministic view of the person. That is, “technical innovation and scientific discovery...are seen to be the most critical sources of change...in social attitudes and in the social structure—the division of labour and the configuration of classes” which in turn will force or anticipate changes in the pattern of political authority, institutions, and behaviour” (Andrew C. Janos, Politics and Paradigms: Changing Theories of Change in Social Science [Stanford: Stanford UP, 1986], 3).


28. Ibid., 144.

29. Ibid., 144-149.

30. Ibid., 149.

31. A variety of criticisms have been levelled against pluralist theory over the years. For example, individuals and groups have unequal finances and resources thus producing policy outcomes that may not actually equate with the public good. See Theodore Lowi, The End of Liberalism (New York: WW. Norton, 1979); and E.E. Schattsneider, The Semi-Sovereign People (New York: Holt Rinehart and Winston, 1960). Coalitions of elites often end up running government (Robert Dahl, A Preface to Democratic Theory [Chicago: U of Chicago Press, 1956]. Neo-institutionalism and policy networks theory emphasise the need to address both the role of institutions and the configurations of interest groups and departments in determining policy outcomes: see Michael M. Atkinson, ed., Governing Canada: Institutions and Public Policy (Toronto: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1993); and William D. Coleman and Grace Skogstad, eds., Policy Communities & Public Policy in Canada: A Structural Approach (Mississauga, Ont.: Copp Clark Pitman, 1990). I focus only on those criticisms that address the role of responsible decision-makers in policy making and the nature of the demand.


33. Goudzwaard and de Lange, Beyond Poverty and Affluence, 97.

34. Goudzwaard and de Lange, Beyond Poverty and Affluence, 4, 96-102.


36. Cited in Ibid., 99-100.

37. Ibid., 100.

38. Goudzwaard and de Lange, Beyond Poverty and Affluence, 102.

39. For a systematic discussion of this position, see Goudzwaard (1984) and (1979).

40. Goudzwaard and de Lange, Beyond Poverty and Affluence, 47.

41. Ibid., 49.

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