

Swarthmore College

## Works

---

History Faculty Works

History

---

Spring 2000

### Review Of "The Uncertain Sciences" By B. Mazlish

Robert C. Bannister  
*Swarthmore College*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://works.swarthmore.edu/fac-history>



Part of the [History Commons](#)

[Let us know how access to these works benefits you](#)

---

#### Recommended Citation

Robert C. Bannister. (2000). "Review Of "The Uncertain Sciences" By B. Mazlish". *Journal Of Interdisciplinary History*. Volume 30, Issue 4. 640-641. DOI: 10.1162/jinh.2000.30.4.640  
<https://works.swarthmore.edu/fac-history/224>

This work is brought to you for free and open access by . It has been accepted for inclusion in History Faculty Works by an authorized administrator of Works. For more information, please contact [myworks@swarthmore.edu](mailto:myworks@swarthmore.edu).



PROJECT MUSE®

---

## The Uncertain Sciences (review)

Robert C. Bannister

Journal of Interdisciplinary History, Volume 30, Number 4, Spring 2000,  
pp. 640-641 (Review)

Published by The MIT Press



➔ For additional information about this article

<http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/jih/summary/v030/30.4bannister.html>

*The Uncertain Sciences*. By Bruce Mazlish (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1998) 328 pp. \$35.00

Since their appearance in the eighteenth century, the “human” sciences have seemed “uncertain” when compared to the natural sciences. This uncertainty, Mazlish argues, reflects historically constructed dichotomies that falsely oppose positivism and hermeneutics—the study of externals (objective) and of meaning (subjective). Deepening this divide, post-modernism carries hermeneutics to the point of “interpretative nihilism” (106). Rather, Mazlish proposes a reconciliation of the two approaches grounded in “historical consciousness” and sensitivity to “emergence” (the products of unintended consequences). Thus conceived, the human sciences provide “understanding” that is truly scientific (16–17). Unlike the small community of natural science, the truth community for the human sciences ideally is all humanity. Although conceding little prospect that such a community will emerge in the near future, Mazlish clings to the hope that, eventually (in “a few hundred years or a few thousand”), it may be realized in our new Global Era (232).

The modern social sciences, in Mazlish’s telling, emerged in response to encounters with “the Other” in the Age of Discovery, to the seventeenth-century scientific revolution, and to Darwinism. From Francis Bacon to the Vienna Circle, positivists presented a vision of science based on observation and experience, and, in logical positivism, the careful correspondence of words and things. Although seriously flawed, positivism provides a valuable example in its aspirations to public verifiability, to a unified scientific method, and to cumulative knowledge.

A method more appropriate to the study of humanity, however, must begin by defining the human species, Mazlish continues, in observations that occasionally approach the politically incorrect. Although human beings belong to the same biological species (in that they interbreed successfully), cultural evolution produces significant differences. The Nuer of the Sudan, although “as human as we moderns are,” are “not as evolved” culturally (70). Culture in turn rests on humanity’s unique ability to think symbolically, an ability that sometimes short-circuits in varieties of “madness” that further compound human difference. Humanity is “an evolutionary species with emergent features” (77). It cannot, as the eighteenth-century philosophes thought, be studied as a whole or by a single method.

Thus enters hermeneutics. The term derives from Hermes, the Greek messenger of the gods (as Mazlish explains in one of many etymological excursions that enliven his text). Initially associated with religion, hermeneutics became a general method in the late nineteenth century. Although conventionally juxtaposed to positivist science, hermeneutics can, and should, be rendered scientific by striving to define a “public reality” constructed through observation and open debate, Mazlish concludes (121). Exploring meaning in a disciplined, communal

fashion, the social sciences have made “spectacular” contributions to our understanding (134). Concepts of capital, free market, and free labor help us comprehend capitalism, for example, just as those of class and ideology illuminate society.

*The Uncertain Sciences* is written for a general audience and “specialists prepared to think outside their own field” (5, 6). It is “resolutely interdisciplinary,” although in subject matter more than methodology (which is rather traditional internalist intellectual history). Mazlish’s learned and insightful surveys of positivism, hermeneutics, and the social sciences will challenge and instruct a variety of readers. His lyrical tribute to historical consciousness is a welcome antidote both to a sterile positivism and to postmodern nihilism.

In Mazlish’s worldview, the most troublesome dichotomies dissolve. But even readers sympathetic to the argument (as is this reviewer) may wonder if lions so easily lie down with lambs. Can the appropriation of the term “science” ever allay a nagging sense that conceptualizations shaped at one point in human evolution and often invoked for instrumental purposes (for example, the “hyperbolic claims” of Marxism or Comtism) are less “true” than generalizations about gravity (211)? Does the novel really provide “scientific knowledge befitting its subject matter” (120)? Perhaps a different label is necessary, however privileged “science” remains in our culture. Further, is it either necessary or desirable that all humanity share a scientific outlook and historical consciousness (as opposed to policymakers and educated elites)? Or will such an outcome impoverish the diversity that has defined the human species?

Robert C. Bannister  
Swarthmore College