



1. *Why is Economics Trending Toward Sociology?*
2. *Ray Bradbury's Enchanted Science Fiction*

# Why is Economics Trending Toward Sociology?

By JOHN MADIGAN  
STAFF WRITER

In the latest *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, the most prestigious economics journal by measured impact, there are twelve articles. Given its acceptance rate of just 3 percent, the *Quarterly Journal's* articles represent the pinnacle of economics research. Surprisingly, in this recent issue, less than half are about economics.

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While titles like “Indebted Demand” and “Hall of Mirrors: Corporate Philanthropy and Strategic Advocacy” represent the type of research that is to be expected in a top economics journal, ones like “Concessions, Violence, and Indirect Rule: Evidence from the Congo Free State,” “Folklore,” and “Strict ID Laws Don't Stop Voters: Evidence from a U.S. Nationwide Panel, 2008–2018” seem out of place there. While any of these topics are worthwhile, why are top economists working on sociology and political science?

After Paul Samuelson published his *Foundations of Economic Analysis*, economics increasingly became dominated by mathematics. Instead of tomes like *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy* or *The General Theory of Employment, Interest, and Money* published by the previous generation, economists after Samuelson wrote much shorter and more data-driven texts stressing a particular ideological and mathematical framework. By doing so, they developed more and more sophisticated methods to prove their theories. From creating entirely new methods to improving upon old ones borrowed from medicine and psychology, the study of economics increasingly consisted of learning a variety of statistical methods and when

to apply them to certain scenarios.

Due to this focus on empirical methods rather than theory, the current generation of economists is highly capable of proving causality whenever a quasi-experimental situation arises.

While economists heavily use statistics to quantify observable phenomena, sociologists are more skeptical of them as an accurate way to understand the world. For example, while economists are happy with stating that a policy caused a drop in reported crimes, sociologists would be much more skeptical because the statistics could be massaged by the government agency that collected them or be distorted by structural bias. This relative skepticism toward statistics created an opportunity for economists to fill the void.

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Instead of sociologists attempting, as one article recently put it, to “fill in the gaps and expand upon a group's ethnographic record” by focusing on things like political complexity, leading economists are doing so, using machine learning methods to demonstrate how certain traits in stories can predict cultural norms.

Although the study of folklore is fascinating and worthwhile, economists should consider the opportunity cost of not focusing more completely on the economy. If economists are not sufficiently studying the economy, society will be stuck with our current inadequate level of sophistication when it comes to policy. Monetary policy and taxation, among other economic matters, drastically affect the lives and well-being of entire nations.

# Ray Bradbury's Enchanted Science Fiction

By CASIMIR ZABLOTSKI  
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

There are many books in my house. As a child, I spent a lot of time digging through piles of dusty boxes that seemed to go to the ceiling, hoping to find a new novel to spend an afternoon with. My favorites were the Bantam books with simple but memorable covers, so worn and aged that they often fell off halfway through my time with them. I loved the smell of the decaying paper and thought it was fascinating how yellow and oxidized the pages were.

Out of all the books in those boxes, I enjoyed Ray Bradbury's the most. Bradbury is best known for writing *Fahrenheit 451*, a cautionary tale where a numbed and hedonistic populace allows all literature to be burned, preferring to consume mass media. But his prose is at its strongest in his short stories, relics of early modern science fiction rife with impossibility and brimming with imagination. Take, for example, *The Martian Chronicles*, a collection of short stories that traces the colonization of Mars and subsequent destruction of Martian civilization. Bradbury's yarns are memorable, even though very few characters appear in multiple stories, because they succinctly explore the human condition in an evolving world.

In one instance, an unhappily married Martian named Ylla telepathically foresees the arrival of an expeditionary crew from Earth, fantasizing about one of the crew members, while her husband dismisses her as either childish or insane. But while Ylla cannot comprehend the possibility of extraterrestrial life, her husband is more jealous than curious, humanoid but as emotional as a human, and murders the crew when it lands. In another story after Mars has been colonized and disease has decimated the Martian population, colonists receive word of a nuclear war starting on Earth, which soon destroys the Australian continent. The colonists are helpless, countless millions of miles away, and must watch as flames engulf

*continued on back*

their true home. And the most famous story in this collection is “There Will Come Soft Rains,” which portrays an automated house on Earth struggling against encroaching nature to continue its cleaning and maintenance regimen, oblivious to the nuclear holocaust that burnt its owners’ shadows into the wall, in sharp contrast to Ylla’s peaceful home pages ago.

Bradbury’s storytelling power comes partly from a latent romanticism in his works, a fascination with the tension between existence in an increasingly mechanistic world of reason and the spirituality,

Bradbury believed that his stories were potent *because* they were untrue; their staying power was in their almost myth-like treatment of the human condition against an implausible but entertaining backdrop. Even his tamer works, to some degree, examine how mankind would operate within some future reality. The specifics of this reality are often vague, Bradbury having cleverly crafted the narrative to express his own imagination but leave room for the reader to have fun too.

Some believe this balance is missing in contemporary science fiction. It often attempts to make a

But science fiction does not necessarily have to be enchanted to be entertaining – look at the subgenre of cyberpunk, which often disenchant even the mind in tales about artificial intelligence and lifelike androids, but still tells moving and relatable stories.

Cyberpunk succeeds where “hard science fiction” does not because it rests on an imagination that is unwavering in its construction and unafraid to lean into the fantastic. And it often tells more compact stories, as Bradbury did, focusing on interesting characters posed against a semi-recognizable world rather than spending pages

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emotionality, and curiosity intrinsic to all humans. Bradbury wrote stories that could resonate with anyone, perhaps in line with Leo Tolstoy’s definition of art as that which makes one feel.

In a story from a different collection, an astronaut flung from his ship and about to burn up in the atmosphere contemplates his empty life and wishes that his death will mean something, as a child on Earth looks up at the sky and makes a wish on a falling star, the astronaut’s last moments a gift. In another, a couple in rural Mexico encounter a stream of American refugees of nuclear war, bewildered at their claim that the world is over because nothing has changed in their small town, possessing a morality and worldview simpler and purer than the corrupted society that created such devastation.

He certainly wrote compelling stories, but it is worth considering where Bradbury’s work stands in relation to the larger genre of science fiction. He actually considered himself a sort of fantasy writer, despite instances of scientific speculation in his stories, because he knew that his depiction of shapeshifting and clairvoyant Martians was fundamentally untrue. Instead,

world credible by conveying a myriad of dense explanations for, say, an imaginary technology’s existence—which may only delay the point where a reader must suspend their disbelief and detract from character development or thematic coherence.

Contributions from physicists and futurologists on possible ways to make an unbelievable part of the story, like faster-than-light travel, valid may detract from what we are naturally better at expressing and understanding, weighing down a story’s plot. The original *Star Trek* was entertaining because, like many of Bradbury’s short stories, it was realistic in form, not content, and it knew that. The “dilithium crystals” that powered its space travel were a plot device, not a fantastically explained potential reality within our understanding of science, just as Bradbury never explained many of the physical challenges of living on Mars. These stories exist within their own realities, both for entertainment and to relay a message more interesting than it would be if it was forced to conform to our reality. Arguably, much of recent science fiction is disenchanting, lacking any sort of magical feeling in trying to square with our world.

cataloguing different planets and explaining ridiculous technologies. Here and in Bradbury’s work, the author shows rather than tells, creating stories that anyone may enjoy.

# ENQUIRY

Vol. IX  
A publication of the AHI Undergraduate Fellows

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**#RayBradbury**