

Dinosaur bones and delusions of 'objective functionality'

*"The more any quantitative social indicator is used for social decision making, the more subject it will be to corruption pressures and the more apt it will be to distort and corrupt the social processes it is intended to monitor"*¹

Whenever we ponder the logic to human discovery, we are addicted to the dictum of "you can't control what you can't measure"². But are we true in this notion, or are we collectively tuning into a broken melody of objective functionality? Is it really the price of progress, or is it at the cost of unbridled human creativity?

From philosophical to literary, the following are a few moloch manifestations in history- a thread of anecdotes where 'noble', 'logical' human ambitions brought forth maladies of collective tragedy.

- 1) *The Cobra effect*³- Her Majesty's bureaucracy was facing a poisonous concentration in Delhi; back in her days of colonial glory. The density of the cobra population had been on the rise and a bounty on cobra skin was a logical economic incentive. It worked and it worked a little too well- soon enough the enterprising, subaltern subjects had rigged the incentive with skin farms. Knee deep in cobra skin, the bounty programme was recalled and overnight cash cow assets became toxic liabilities. Delhi, once again had a snake problem, only this time; as VCs put it- at scale.
- 2) *Pay-by-the bone*⁴- Improve efficiency by paying the archeological diggers per bone, and rest assured the moloch will smash pristine fossils to fine-ass toothpicks.
- 3) *The Wells- Fargo Rainmaker*- Progress has to be packaged into a measure, or so thought the kings of Wells Fargo- as they set Ayn Rand levels of sales targets on their army of bankers. The Machiavellians in suit followed orders to keep bonuses and jobs - when the battle was over, it cost them over \$ 3 Billion to save the executives from regulatory guillotines⁵

¹ Campbell's law https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Campbell's_law

² T. DeMarco, Controlling software projects: management, measurement, and estimates. Prentice Hall PTR, 1986

³ Siebert, Horst (2001). Der Kobra-Effekt. Wie man Irrwege der Wirtschaftspolitik vermeidet (in German). Munich: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt

⁴ B. Bryson, A short history of nearly everything. Transworld Digital, 2010

⁵<https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/wells-fargo-agrees-pay-3-billion-resolve-criminal-and-civil-investigations-sales-practices#:~:text=February%2021%2C%202020-,Wells%20Fargo%20Agrees%20to%20Pay%20%243%20Billion%20to%20Resolve%20Criminal,of%20Accounts%20without%20Customer%20Authorization>