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Just What Scientific Lore Would Be Better Unknown?



EVERY DEADLINE poses a new opportunity and a new challenge. I scan my recent productions only to see a string of lamentations. I hope to offer some novelty of scientific fact or critical point of view; some I know may be mainly bad temper indignation.

Could one not expose some more positive program to build, some new vision of human achievement illuminated by science? Or if not, some cheery amusements? But even such a titillation as the new chemical aphrodisiacs, when one thinks again, will turn into another of the ironic self-deceptions that foolish mortals are prone to play.

Good news is just hard to find, and then we must be wary of it. This is the age when sweet is bitter, when even the blessings of new births are ambiguous (we would as statistics). Among younger people, the frustrations of potential nuclear war, population unlimited, and pollution everywhere are especially poignant, and are sometimes internalized into self-hatred and alienation. How hard to extol the dignity of man, when there are so many of us!

PERHAPS, THEN, there is a positive side to concerted criticism: that to react to obvious wrongs is to help build the only kind of community that can enlist our energies and dissipate our loneliness. Karl Popper's book "The Open Society and its Enemies" is the manifesto for piecemeal social engineering, which he opposed to the ideals of Uto-

pian planning of the pre-Stalinist era.

He wrote 30 years ago that "a systematic fight against suffering and injustice and war is more likely to be supported by the agreement and approval of a great number of people than the fight for the establishment of some ideal. The existence of social evils can be comparatively well established. Those who suffer can judge for themselves, and the others can hardly deny that they would not like to change places.

"It is infinitely more complicated to reason about an ideal society. Social life is so complicated that few men, or none at all, could judge a blueprint for social engineering on the grand scale . . . accordingly, adopt the method of searching for, and fighting against, the greatest and most urgent evils of society, rather than searching for, and fighting for, its greatest ultimate good."

As the better way to unify a liberal society, Popper's argument is faultless. Today, we have just one reason to voice an exception: the survival of the human community on earth may already be a Utopian ideal.

For its realization, we have little experience, tools, training or organization. We lack even the will to proceed with the long-range global planning needed to meet the realities of today's poverty and tomorrow's revolutions of hunger and unfulfilled expectations.

IN THE FACE of the Pearson Commission's reasoned analysis of world development needs, Congress last year slashed foreign aid appropriations to the lowest levels in recent years. This was harsh and ungenerous, but was it totally irrational?

For we are too divided against ourselves to think out the plans to reveal how a billion dollars more or less would matter for the long run odds of a viable world. Back to piecemeal planning, until we can rebuild our institutions to where they can take on such tasks.

The same overview may help short-circuit a lot of argument about technological assessment, how to allocate priorities for one kind of science compared to another and so on. The fact is, no one is wise enough for such judgments on a grand scale.

Who would have known enough to fund Gutenberg? And who knows enough now to say whether the Manhattan Project will have led to the end, or to a new beginning, of world history? Just what scientific knowledge already in hand would be better unknown, and if so, how would we keep it so? Do we imagine overpowering nature to annihilate a fact?

More important than particular scientific products are the institutions which are built as the all-important side-effects of the technological budget and which can generate the balance we need. Large defense contracts help build missile systems, and also a military-industrial complex.

Supporting "big science" assures a ready reserve of physicists and engineers; "little science" and the humanities at the universities will promote skeptical teachers and critics. If we replace the universities with vocational schools, we can also bolster the status quo, but at the expense of our adaptability to change and the chance of ever taking on the big jobs ahead.

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