News and Comment

Scientists and Public Affairs: Though World Has Changed, They Remain Preoccupied with the Bomb

Ever since the Manhattan Project provided scientists with a bad conscience and a head start on thinking about the implications of the nuclear age, thousands of scientists have come to regard national security and related matters as a major extracurricular interest.

Banded together in a variety of organizations, such as the Federation of American Scientists, Scientists on Survival, the Committee for a Sane Nuclear Policy, and Committees on Scientific Information, many of them have unquestionably performed invaluable public service while a few have unquestionably also produced a great deal of nonsense.

As sideline critics, they contributed to keeping government honest on the biological hazards of radiation; they provided influential and informed agitation for working out arms-control agreements with the Soviets; they contributed to rational debate on the civil defense issue, and, in general, helped bring the scientific community into critical areas that, for a variety of reasons, were shunned by the standing professional societies.

Today, they are still working in these areas with the same fervor and dedication, and it is hard to see how this is anything but praiseworthy as long as a hair-trigger balance continues to exist between East and West. At the same time, though, the fact is that the world has changed a great deal since the first appearance of the harsh realities that spawned these organizations. The Russians are no longer at the gates, an above-ground test ban agreement has been signed, the arms race has been slowed by budgetary pressures, and President Johnson seems to be quite interested in accelerating something that was already under way at the time of Kennedy's death—namely, a swing away from national preoccupation with international affairs and a growing emphasis on the multitudes of serious problems that afflict this country at home; all of which raises the question, Where are the scientists going from here if they wish to continue to devote their after-hours energies to public problems?

The answer is that they are going along in the same rut, fascinated with working out disarmament schemes that seem to have only one defect—the Russians won't buy them; oblivious of the fact that many issues on which they once labored almost alone are now being handled on an institutional basis—by the Arms Control and Disarmament Agency, for example; and indifferent to the fact that many critical problems of American life which could benefit from illumination by their good minds are left by default to others of questionable abilities.

Undoubtedly, a physicist with time on his hands and a yen for helping mankind gets a bigger kick out of devising schemes for underground nuclear inspection than he does out of thinking about the hideous traffic problems that are wrecking American cities; but when one looks to the probabilities of where his well-trained mind will do the most good, it's a safe bet that traffic comes before testing.

Nevertheless, none of the aforementioned organizations deigns to concern itself with so mundane a problem as traffic control, nor do they seem to want to get involved in any of the scores of other domestic problems where they probably could do a great deal of good. It is easy enough to agitate against civil defense, and, by doing so, many organizations of scientists helped arouse useful public debate. With prestigious names attached to their pronouncements, and by invoking the magic of 'science," they were able to talk up the issue, thereby reinforcing the congressional feeling that civil defense isn't worth the money.

But none of the organizations that developed such passions over civil defense seem able to develop even the least bit of feeling about the quality of science instruction in the nation's high schools. If they could rock the U.S. government with a well-drawn and well-publicized brief against civil defense, it is not improbable that they could rock any board of education with a well-drawn and well-publicized brief on the deficiencies of secondary education. But they don't seem to want to get involved. If they could arouse public opinion about the health effects of nuclear fallout, they could probably just as easily arouse public opinion about the health effects of air pollution. But, again, problems of this sort have tended to remain outside their area of concern.

Talent readily volunteers to cogitate and speculate on disengagement plans for middle Europe, tension reduction, and gradual and instantaneous disarmament, and on how to turn missiles into ploughshares, all of which are mightily important and worthy of the most expert attention. But none of the scientist organizations seem to want to volunteer its efforts for pressing problems that have grown in importance since the bomb—problems, which, though less urgent than the critical issue of human survival, are nevertheless enormously important for the quality of American life. For example, if it was useful for scientists to volunteer their views on civil defense and East-West relations, why wouldn't it be equally useful for them to volunteer their views and professional capabilities on automotive design, which—despite the industry's protests—is a key factor in some 40,000 highway deaths each year, or on city planning, or civil rights, or the quality of television programming?

The answer, of course, is that after nearly two decades of conditioning, the extracurriculars readily come flocking to the remotest arms control conference but don't feel it's worth their efforts to think of other problems along the way. To some extent, this is changing. Recently, for example, the Federation of American Scientists has been showing signs of breaking away from its long-standing devotion to national-security-related matters and has been thinking and talking about population planning and space. But, by and large, the scientist organizations have recently done little to uphold C. P. Snow's view that the scientist can see farther than others. The world is changing, new problems are replacing old ones; the East-West conflict is, if not diminishing, at least taking on new forms, but the scientists with time to spare are still transfixed by the problems of the past decade.

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