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EDITORIAL CORRESPONDENCE: 1515 Massachusetts Ave., NW, Washington, D.C. 20005. Phone: 202-387-7171. Cable: Advancesci. Washington. Copies of "Instructions for Contributors" can be obtained from the editorial office. ADVERTISING CORRESPONDENCE: Rm. 1740, 11 W. 42 St., New York, N.Y. 10036. Phone: 212-PE 6-1858.

Social Problems and Social Science

A call for large-scale support of the social sciences was a recurring theme of the 25-27 January meeting of the House of Representatives' Committee on Science and Astronautics and its Panel on Science and Technology. Lord Snow, Joint Parliamentary Secretary of the British Ministry of Technology, warned: "There was some excuse for our ancestors' not foreseeing the effects of the first industrial revolution. There is no excuse this time . . . we should be investing more . . . in the social sciences . . . we are more ignorant than is wise, or safe, or human" (*Science*, 11 February). Thomas Malone added that the problems of economic growth require "the productive interaction of many disciplines—natural scientists, social scientists, life scientists, engineers, managers." Charles Price agreed and commented that 5 years ago he would not have included the social sciences. Roger Revelle announced, "My purpose today is to urge as strongly as I can that this Committee take the lead in stimulating and fostering those sciences that deal with human beings and their behavior."

Occasionally there comes a time when a research area seems ripe for special support. Three decades ago the Rockefeller Foundation and others began to give special support to molecular biology, and thus laid the groundwork for the magnificent achievements in that area. Shortly after World War II, Congress became convinced that biomedical research would repay special support. Are the social sciences ready for similar treatment?

Of major social problems there is no lack: the upheavals that accompany rapid industrialization; juvenile delinquency; mass violence; too rapid population growth; the need to improve education. It is much more difficult to capture the essence of such problems in the laboratory or under controlled conditions than it is to capture the essence of a physical or biological problem. Some of the fundamental work needed to gain greater understanding of human and social processes can be conducted under controlled or laboratory conditions. But much must be studied where things are happening, under conditions of frustratingly complicated reality.

Yet there are some hopeful signs. The computer is a great aid in simulating complex social systems. The number of social scientists with a command of quantitative and experimental methodology is growing. Problem-centered studies have taught psychologists to work with engineers, managers with mathematicians, sociologists and economists with government officials. The Russell Sage Foundation has been providing fellowships to enable social scientists and members of the professions to work together to understand each other's problems and methods.

One congressman remarked during the meeting that it will be difficult to get large government support for the social sciences until they have their sputnik. Perhaps so, yet philanthropy and government have both been willing to increase support when it seemed that the investment might be a good one. The basic judgment to make, therefore, is whether the ideas, the tools, and the methods now available or developing in the social sciences make it seem likely that, within a reasonable time, these disciplines can offer substantially increased help in meeting pressing social problems. If a strong case can be made that the social sciences have reached this stage, providing the support called for at the Committee sessions would surely make good scientific, social, and political sense.

—DAEL WOLFFLE