

Aspen Technology Conference Ends in Chaos

Aspen, Colo. The performance record for interdisciplinary gatherings of superstars addressing themselves to world problems is not especially formidable. But quite possibly a new mark for chaos and nonachievement was established 29 August–2 September in this mountain resort at an international conference on "Technology: Social Goals and Cultural Options," participated in by some 69 scientists, science policy "statesmen," writers, and assorted hangers-on. The proceedings were characterized by anarchic wrangling in which Murray Gell-Mann, Nobel laureate in physics at Caltech, took an exuberant lead in his role as conference cochairman.

Not far behind him, though, was the other cochairman, Alexander King of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, who was unable to control an increasingly exasperated 4-hour debate on the final day of the conference, in which Gell-Mann defied the conference organizers by introducing a more fiery final declaration as a substitute for one drafted that morning by a 20-member steering committee. The steering committee, itself divided, had torn up a first draft which had been composed the night before. During the final debate, many of the phrases in the draft Gell-Mann introduced (which had been put together by Emanuel Mesthene of Harvard, head of the program on Technology and Society) were chopped out. At the end of the debate, the writer Mary McCarthy followed the lead of her colleague, Paul Goodman, and refused to have any part in the declaration. In exhaustion, the conference left the detailed composition of a fourth and final draft to Maurice Goldsmith, head of a London-based organization known as the Science of Science Foundation, and John Maddox, the editor of *Nature*. After Goldsmith had finished, Maddox reordered the statement and changed many phrases.

The final statement declared that the world is indeed beset by many pressing problems, that technology can be employed for both good and evil, and that something should be done both about poverty and threats to the environment. In a tone of moderate urgency, the statement said, "Even if man succeeds in the supreme task of avoiding annihilation by nuclear warfare, the consequences for society and the natural environment of the uncontrolled peaceful uses of technology could bring disaster within the foreseeable future."

Multidisciplinary

Sponsored by the Aspen Institute for Humanistic Studies, whose president is Joseph E. Slater, and by the Paris-based International Association for Cultural Freedom, whose president is Shepard Stone, the meeting brought together journalists, intellectual activists such as Ivan Illich of Cuernavaca, Mexico, scientists such as Salvador Luria of M.I.T. and I. I. Rabi of Columbia, both Nobel laureates, and Harvey Brooks and Roger Revelle, both of whom serve on a large number of official and semiofficial committees in Washington.

Such a disparate gathering could agree on little. Miss McCarthy and Goodman repeatedly took the floor to throw figurative custard pies at the technocratic mandarins present. There was no agreement on which problems are urgent now or soon will be. Biologist Cyrus Levinthal of Columbia University said pollution was a red herring being used by politicians trying to distract attention from far more serious problems in urban ghettos. He claimed that many pollution problems have become less acute, not more, and that the main pollution issue is "a crisis of expectations."

Brooks promptly replied that there are cases of apparently irreversible deterioration in the environment, such as Lake Erie. But even this was disputed by Maddox, who cited figures that fish yields in the lake have been increasing.

In the morning-after view of many participants, the conference failed to attack in depth the most fundamental issue raised: the conflicting claims of a modern standard of living for all mankind and the world's endowment of resources (including water and air). This conflict is expected to make a battleground out of the meeting on the environment which the United Nations plans to hold in 1972 in Stockholm.

Income Redistribution

Both K. E. de Graft-Johnson of Ghana and Indonesia's UN Ambassador S. Soedjatmoko said that the goal of a Western standard for people in poor countries was unattainable and that world demand would have to be reorganized around "minimum demand" or "basic things." Their speeches were an unmistakable call for a world redistribution of income and a lowering of material living standards in the West.

There was no resolution on how to think about population control. Gell-Mann, who is a member of the President's Science Advisory Committee, kept arguing that the potential gains from a swift reduction in birth rates were so important that bigger attempts than heretofore should be made to bring population growth down, even before significant economic growth takes place. "The less of us there are," Gell-Mann said, "the less we have to tell the poor of the world they must stay that way."

Revelle, a former oceanographer and now head of the Harvard Center for Population Studies, who has repeatedly advised the governments of India and Pakistan, replied that the only examples of sustained population decline up to now have followed, not preceded, sustained economic growth. With a patient air, Revelle was implicitly wishing Gell-Mann, a newcomer to science policy questions, the best of luck.

The costs of the meeting, reported to be nearly \$50,000, were shared by the Anderson Foundation of New York, the Aspen Institute, and the International Association for Cultural Freedom, whose contribution originated with the Ford Foundation.

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