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Crises and Knowledge

A period of faith in science and technology as an engine of social progress has come to an end. The power of knowledge to anticipate undesirable effects of technological change and to trigger corrective action has been questioned. We have learned, once again, that social systems receive much of their dynamics from the challenge of crises, with their attendant disruption and violence.

In the last 15 years, we have lived through an impressive number of crises, most of them, though not all, real and serious: the space and missile gaps of the Sputnik era, the threat of mass unemployment through automation, the fear of nuclear annihilation, the shame of poverty at home, the new fight for social equality and civil rights, the strangulation of urban centers, and the degradation of the environment. Statistically, this would suggest that a crisis surfaces biennially; but since some overlap exists, the active lifetime of major crises is usually between 3 to 5 years. This, obviously, is the case only for the virulent stage of a crisis. Its latent stage can be considerably longer, as can its actual persistence after its gradual disappearance from public attention.

What, then, brings a crisis into the open? The role of the media is crucial to the process. They can generate public consciousness. We tend to criticize the press, particularly television, for often focusing on extreme situations. But the extreme views of "alarmists," as reflected by the media, can serve to uproot the public from its inertia and to gradually arouse public concern. In fact, they seem to be more apt to mobilize the public than patient scientific analysis, rational weighing of costs versus benefits, and sober evaluation of complex situations. The hard-to-accept lesson of the past decade is that knowledge, by and large, has not lived up to our high expectations in identifying critical social ills and inducing the public and its government to act before a new crisis situation is reached. Knowledge has not yet provided us with an efficient early warning system for social reform. That our expectations have been unrealistically high in this respect perhaps explains much of the current plight of science and technology.

At its height, a crisis leads to frantic activity for finding new solutions to the now generally recognized ill. Grass-roots action groups, new legislation, governmental reorganization, and many other forms of social experimentation give shape to society's effort to respond to the new need. But a point of saturation is reached before long, and interest begins to melt—perhaps not so much as a result of backlash, but because the limited attention span of the public is diverted elsewhere. Though hardly solved, the problem does not return to the status quo ante.

A psychological change remains. It is the character and extent of this change that determines the flexibility or rigidity of the system's response. If minds have changed for the better, the time has come to wage the battle for finally resolving the crisis. The battle now is no longer in the forefront of the media and public attention; it has to be fought in the face of waning interest and disenchantment with quick solutions. It consists of hard, patient work aimed at gradual, but real, improvements. It is during this stage, I suggest, that analysis and scientific inquiry can make their most valuable contributions to the solution of social crises. It is time for reassessing the role of knowledge in social reform, both with regard to what it cannot do and with regard to where it can make a decisive contribution.—JURGEN SCHMANDT, *Lyndon B. Johnson School of Public Affairs, University of Texas, Austin 78712*