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The AAAS Meeting—Where the Action Is

The AAAS annual meeting has come to have major impact on the public and on government policy. At most gatherings of professional societies, participants talk mainly to each other. However, at our Christmas meeting, speakers communicate with a wider audience. About 400 representatives of press, radio, and television attend, and they find much to convey to the public.

Much of what is presented at the meeting is purely scientific in character. Any scientist who is willing to be interested in material outside his special field can partake of a rich smorgasbord of significant interdisciplinary symposia. He can attend lectures involving mathematics, astronomy, physics, chemistry, biology, psychology, economics, sociology, history of science, medicine, engineering, agriculture, psychoanalysis, and others. The meeting is unusual in the breadth of topics covered; it is unique in the extent to which the many interactions of science, technology, and public policy are treated. In providing a forum for discussions of this kind, the AAAS is being responsive to one of the great needs of our times.

Technology, based on science, has brought great benefits while creating many problems for mankind. In meeting these problems, traditional sources of guidance have been relatively ineffective. The clergy has only begun to attempt to deal with ethical issues arising from technology. The current contributions of humanists to discussions of purposes and directions for society have been less than impressive. A major response has been a generalized damnation of all of science and technology and a childish desire to return to a vanished, idealized natural state. In addressing complex social problems, scientists may have inadequate backgrounds, but they have some assets. They are future-oriented. They tend to be cautiously optimistic that problems can be solved. They can estimate the potentialities and limitations of technology. These qualities ensure that scientists will have a considerable voice in shaping the future. The AAAS meeting is an unusually effective mechanism for making those voices heard. To some observers, the sounds coming out of the meeting are reminiscent of the Tower of Babel. Scientists can agree on many purely scientific matters, but the injection of policy and politics brings out every shade of opinion and a good deal of heat and intolerance. The stimulus of new problems also brings out scholarship and imaginative thinking.

Last year, after the well-publicized unpleasantness at Chicago, fears were expressed that senior scientists would absent themselves from future AAAS meetings. This has not proved to be true. For example, among the speakers and panelists will be about 50 members of the National Academy of Sciences or the National Academy of Engineering. Apparently aversion to unpleasantness has been counterbalanced by an even more powerful motivation—desire to be where the action is.

Speakers at the AAAS meeting will include those with views ranging from right to ultraleft, with age distribution from youth to old age and with backgrounds from pure science to practical politics. Altogether, some 1400 will participate and many others in the audience will join in discussions.

Like any large meeting, the Christmas sessions will convey some that is wise and some that is foolish, some that is significant and some that is trivial. For attendees it will be an interesting, exciting experience; for the public it will be a source of additional illumination of complex issues.

—PHILIP H. ABELSON