LETTERS

Metrication: Historical Perspective

The tone of A. Hunter Dupree's letter, "Metrication as cultural adaptation" (19 July, p. 208), is exemplary, but regrettably his arguments are not. Like the English, who "could have profited from our . . . experience when they came to decimalize their coinage," Dupree does not appear to benefit from history.

If we consider that the greater part of the world uses the metric system, there is surely no shortage of examples of how countries with varying social and technological characters originally managed their "cultural adaptations." Investigation reveals that the general concern was not to look back to preserve a marginal and relatively unimportant aspect of heritage, but to effect a practical reform for future generations in a world where intercommunication was increasing. But perhaps after all it is this looking backward that makes our case unique: carpenters in France are presumably able to repair buildings somewhat older than those in Providence, Rhode Island, without calling for a return to the toise.

To write that wholesale metrication involves "destroying one culture and substituting another" is to give an exaggerated importance to quantitative measurement in the cultural life of a nation. Whether it was the Romans giving the British a metric system two millenia ago, or the French giving it to the world in the last century, no cultural dark ages appear to have followed the rapid withering of old measuring systems. No doubt some mourned the passing of miles and leagues, as today some mourn the passing of the steam locomotive. But we don't need to be the first country genuinely at home using both diesel and steam locomotives.

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Dupree speaks of making "the United States . . . at home using two or more measuring languages." He seems to be overlooking the fact that we are at present using four systems of measurement: metric, engineer's, machinist's, and English (and a fifth if you include horse racing). All of this is patently ridiculous; engineers measure in tenths of a foot while machinists measure in tenths of an inch, with no common ground anywhere.

Dupree's point about carpenters working on old buildings is also badly taken. Lumber sizes in use today are not the same as those used 200 years ago, so it does not matter in the least whether old construction members are measured in cubits, inches, or centimeters when being replaced or repaired.

Speaking of carpenters, it might be nice to have a bit of honesty brought into our lumber sizing. Why should a piece of lumber measuring 1⅝ by 3⅝ inches be called a two-by-four? Calling it a four fifteen-by-nine twenty-five (its actual size in centimeters) would be honest and descriptively straightforward.

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Cancer Research in the Wrong Direction?

Bandwagons have always existed and there will always be those who jump onto one. Sometimes it is creative and useful to do so, but usually it involves a sacrifice of original ideas. To survive in research, unfortunately, people are forced to do such things.

Cancer research has become a booming business for some groups in the past few years because the people and the government want a cure for cancer. Tissue culture has emerged as a respected science of tremendous importance. But business and industry have crept in there too. In addition to culture dishes and media, animal cells have become a commercial product. One can buy cells by the kilogram from a supplier. This is certainly an advantage, and since cancer researchers have started using commercial cells, mostly of two kinds (3T3 and WI38), considerable amounts of information have been accumulated about the biology of these cells.

What have we found and what does it mean? We have learned that viruses and chemicals can transform 3T3 cells to a neoplastic state and that these cells can produce tumors when inoculated in suitable hosts. But the tumors produced by these cells are sarcomas (derived from fibroblasts), which are very rare in human beings; 90 percent of human tumors are carcinomas, which are derived from epithelial cells. So what do we gain from growing sarcoma-producing cells in tissue culture except publishing papers and doing research to