LETTERS

Academy Energy Study

In connection with Philip M. Boffey's article of 28 January (News and Comment, p. 380), we would like to clear up a possible misunderstanding concerning the nature of the interim report of the NAS–NRC Committee on Nuclear and Alternative Energy Systems (CONAES) and the role of the 250 or more "participants" in this study. The study is being conducted on three levels: the 16-member CONAES committee; four panels; and some 30 "resource groups," 27 of which report to one or more of the panels, with the other three reporting to the main committee.

The interim report is solely the responsibility of the parent committee, and no participant aside from the 16 members of the committee should be inferred to be responsible for its conclusions or for the conclusions that will appear in the final report to be issued this summer.

It is intended that reports from each of the four panels will be published by the Academy at approximately the same time as the report of the parent committee, and the panel reports may include contributions from many of the resource groups. The panel reports will be the responsibility of the relevant panel members, and will not necessarily agree with the views arrived at by the parent committee after its review and analysis of the panel and resource group inputs.

It is regrettable that, whereas Boffey's article carefully stated the limited conclusions of the interim report, several stories in the general press contained speculation concerning the agreed-upon conclusions of CONAES that went well beyond any statements made in the interim report.

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"Scientific" Social Anthropology

Gina Bari Kolata's article "Social anthropologists learn to be scientific" (Research News, 25 Feb., p. 770) ascribes certain policies of judgment and action to the Program Director for Anthropology of the National Science Foundation (NSF). I am writing because of a real concern over the policies that are evidently being pursued by this office of NSF.

The burden of the article is that, in an apparent attempt to improve the service of her office, the Program Director for Anthropology has been advising applicants that they should design their studies so as to be "more scientific." Unfortunately, Kolata is not explicit as to what is meant by "scientific" in this practice, but given the history and nature of anthropology, and some recent individual instances with which I am familiar of grant applications to NSF, I gather that it means the formulation of research proposals in the form of the hypothetical-deductive method. The arbitrary imposition of any specific paradigm of methodology on all research projects is dubious; on some social anthropological projects, the requirement is positively destructive.

There are at least two major areas of work in social anthropology to which this approach is prejudicial. First is that known as general ethnography, and second is the so-called "interpretive" approach. The first is scientific exploration that falls into the "context of discovery." Ethnography in its most general sense is the description of the ways of life of peoples of the world. It has been one of the major sources of basic anthropological information. It has ranged in kind from its earlier history of reports of missionaries, explorers, colonial officers, and travelers to contemporary detailed explorations of specific aspects of life in which a systematic series of approaches are used that have become known generally as "ethnoscience." The approach, while historically more concerned with the "exotic societies," has long since become a major methodology for the study of all societies, our own complex and urban way of life included.

The implication in Kolata's article that it is unscientific "to study a particular group simply because it is disappearing or because no one had ever described it before" is simply disastrous. Human society is marked, to a degree uncommon among life forms, with constantly emerging new cultural forms, answering to new conditions and as yet little understood mechanisms. Our best evidence for study is these forms. Of particular importance are those representing adaptations to earlier and now disappearing life conditions on the planet. There are many strong scientific reasons for promoting the investigation of groups that are disappearing or have never been described before. (Not entirely independent of their real scientific importance, there is an additional humanitarian concern, since these groups are often living under increasingly difficult material and environmental circumstances.) For NSF to openly pursue a policy that deters such investigation probably reflects the behavioristic fad that has so marked much of social science in the past quarter-century. It has had some beneficial consequences.