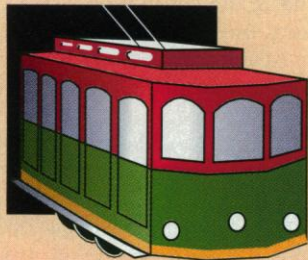


LETTERS



On track?

If human fertility is declining, "Is this bad or good"? German universities might be "in dire need of reform, but what kind of reform?" Is a new theory of turbulence possibly based on "two mistakes"? Could the California Civil Rights Initiative actually *reduce* opportunities for women? And what led up to the coining of the phrase "the streetcar theory of evolution"?

"Environmental Estrogens"

Left out of the discussions of "environmental estrogens" in the 7 June Perspective by S. S. Simons Jr. (p. 1451) and the Book Review by A. N. Hirshfield *et al.* (p. 1444) were the ethical dimensions of this putative problem.

Let us suppose human fertility is declining precipitously. Is this bad or good? On an overcrowded Spaceship Earth, this would seem the least painful of Malthusian mechanisms—infinitely preferable to war, famine, and pestilence. It also does away with any element of coercion or racism in birth control—or does it? Perhaps the most affluent would still be able to procure high-tech access to reproduction. Perhaps the "cure," if found, might be withheld from certain elements of global society.

Even those who wish their own species would go away might balk at a mechanism of human extinction that would take down alligators, herring gulls, and a variety of other nonhuman species.

Once again, reality converges to Kurt Vonnegut.

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German Education

The article "The decline of German universities" by Patricia Kahn (News, 12 July, p. 172) presents an accurate account of the current misery prevailing in many institutions of higher learning in Germany. The reasons for this deplorable state of affairs, however, could have been more fully explained. Admittedly, the German universities are in dire need of reform, but what kind of reform?

To understand the problem, one should

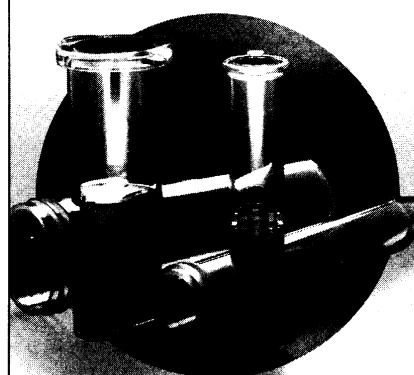
know the historical development of higher education in Germany. Universities were the creation of medieval potentates—princes and clergy. With the Napoleonic reforms of 1806, the institutions lost their often generous endowments in real estate and thus lost their relative independence to state government. As long as the administration was in the hands of well-disposed officials, brought up in the tradition of humanities and culture, the universities fared well, but the picture changed markedly when political ideology gained the upper hand. Egalitarian precepts opened the door to large numbers of often unqualified students, creating a crowding of incredible dimensions. Doors of the medical schools were opened to anybody, even without a high-school diploma. Politicians diverted large sums of public funds to provide the students—who pay no tuition—a hefty subsistence. Because such gifts come in steadily and without strings attached, it follows that Germany boasts the longest study periods before graduation. Certain scientific developments, such as genetic engineering and nuclear power research, were denigrated and designated as unwanted public risks, which has been driving abroad top students.

One may ask, cui bono? The political parties hope to swell their membership rolls by giveaways, but they also expect to benefit from a proletariat of unemployed graduates who promise to strengthen the party ranks by building a utopian system of social justice. The not uncommon installation of advocates of the New Left as university presidents is obviously helpful in achieving these goals.

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