

# Book Reviews

## On So-Called Scientific Conferences

**World Technology and Human Destiny.** Raymond Aron, George Kennan, Robert Oppenheimer, and others. University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, 1963. 246 pp. \$4.95.

It is easy to say what this volume is *not* about: it is not about technology and not about human destiny. If there were an index, neither term would appear in it. It is, however, all but impossible to say what this volume is about, or even what it is supposed to be about. For this is not a book. There are no authors; indeed, two of the three men mentioned in this capacity on the cover—Kennan and Oppenheimer—do not make major contributions and are clearly named only to attract (and, I am afraid, mislead) American readers. All this is, is the transcript, truncated and poorly edited, of a bull session in the faculty lounge.

The faculty, to be sure, is distinguished and contains a number of well-known names—though all except Oppenheimer are political scientists or economists. And the “faculty lounge” was a place in Switzerland where a “Congress for the Liberty of Culture” met some time in the past, presumably in 1959 or 1960. (In keeping with the general level of editing of the volume the date of the meeting is not given, but a French version of the transcript appeared in 1960.)

But otherwise this is the all-too-familiar chatter around the punch tray that can be heard in any university lounge after a faculty meeting or a lecture by a distinguished visitor. Two questions are raised at the beginning—though only in brief and journalistic form. “Is there any political belief for the non-Marxist Left in the post-war world?” And “Which way are the Soviet economy and society going?” But

no one pays much attention to the questions. Every one promptly mounts his own hobbyhorse and rides off in all directions. Michael Polanyi, the British social theorist and ex-physicist, devotes a few moments to an attempt to update Veblen’s Theory of Conspicuous Consumption, and Eric Voegelin, historian of political thought (formerly of Louisiana State University, now at Munich in Germany), says a few words about the emergence of the category of the political in Thucydides. An otherwise unidentified Mr. Nabakov takes a page and a half to speak about the “estrangement of the artist,” the use of sound in modern music, and contemporary Polish painting. The more a man knows about a subject, the less he is permitted to talk about it. There is a good deal of cliché-talk about “science in the modern world.” But the only scientist present—Robert Oppenheimer—is allowed only ten pages to talk, intelligently but far too briefly, about the confusion of tongues in modern science. There is even more talk about the “non-Western world.” But the only non-Westerner present, Asoka Mehta from India, has just a few pages to assert that the non-Western world is not the West. The structure and future of communist economics is one of the major topics. But the one contributor from the Communist world, Bicanic, a Yugoslav economist, barely gets enough space—five pages—to make the point that the Soviet economy succeeds because, contrary to Western belief, it does not plan, but makes purely opportunistic decisions. And, unfortunately, all this is being said in the gray, flat, undistinguished jargon of social science that seems to be the major contribution of whoever edited this volume.

What is really upsetting, however, is that this volume is a fair specimen of

an increasingly common fraud: the bull session transcript that pretends to be a serious book by serious scholars. Such meetings—called variously *conferences*, *conversations*, *confrontations*, and the like—are becoming a favorite substitute for work and thought, at least judging by the increasing number to which I am being invited. They are always “inter-something”—international; intercultural; interdisciplinary; interracial. The invitation stresses that nobody has to prepare anything, that nobody will be expected to do any work, that anything anyone wants to talk about is a proper subject for discussion. And it always implies that everybody is an expert on everything. This may make for a pleasant evening or for vacation fun. It may even serve a useful purpose, provided one believes that face-to-face chitchat is preferable to no communication at all.

But, unfortunately, somebody always brings a tape recorder; and then there is a “book” that has to be published. And undirected, uncontrolled, uninformed conversation by amateurs does no more survive exposure in print than the self-intoxication of the faculty bull session survives when, the next morning, one’s wife or a colleague asks “And what did you talk about last night?”

University presses should at least not be party to this mischief. They have an important function: to publish work that is financially unattractive to the commercial publisher because of its demonstrable superiority. They only destroy themselves and their usefulness if they become “vanity publishers” to the academic promoter and publish work that, like the present volume, is unattractive to the commercial publisher because of its demonstrable inferiority.

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## Ultraviolet Spectroscopy

**Theory and Applications of Ultraviolet Spectroscopy.** H. H. Jaffe and Milton Orchin. Wiley, New York, 1962. xv + 624 pp. Illus. \$15.

This book will be of interest to both organic and physical chemists, to the former as an introduction to some of the current approaches to the interpretation of electronic absorption spectra