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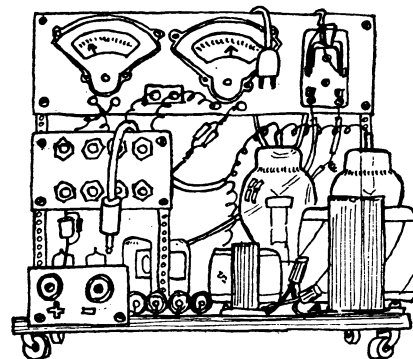
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Public Attitudes toward Science: Righting a Wrong

It is remarkable that in the extensive discussion of the "crisis" in the funding of science, as it has been carried on in *Science* and elsewhere, virtually no attention has been paid to the educational origins of public attitudes toward science. When one considers what is taught about science to nonscience majors in even the best liberal arts colleges and universities one has no reason for surprise at uninformed attitudes toward the place of science and technology in our society. The remarkable fact is that in our liberal arts curricula (as well as in technical curricula) essentially no attention is paid to the dominant forces of contemporary civilization—science and technology as they interact with society.

Bentley Glass, in his editorial "Science education—process or content" (5 Mar., p. 851) and in the book from which it is derived, takes initial steps toward an intelligent appraisal of this situation. But it is a situation that warrants much more concerted and immediate attention from the scientific and academic communities. The causes for this gap in the educational system must be identified and ways of filling

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it must be devised. The search for causes may not be insignificant, for if they lie (as I suspect) basically in academic departmentalism, then the cure could involve greater interdisciplinary activity in the universities, as recommended, on more restricted grounds, by F. A. Long (12 Mar., p. 961).

There are, of course, a small number of educators in departments of history of science, sociology, and intellectual history as well as the sciences who are concerned with the problem and who are developing courses in this area. There is also an extensive literature growing up that can be used, including novels, autobiography, and historical studies as well as journals such as *Science* and the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*. But given the character of the problem, that of producing a broad understanding of the nature of science and technology, the establishment of a few "centers of excellence" in this field is not adequate.

I propose the creation of a committee along the lines of the various groups which in the 1950's so successfully created curricula in physics, biology, and chemistry at introductory levels. The committee could address at least two aspects of the problem: First, it could produce a report which would be of direct use to an individual instructor who intended to give one or more courses in the area of science and society, presumably at the college level. The report could also contain examples of syllabi which have been used under various approaches and an extensive annotated bibliography. Second, the committee could take a careful look at the academic conditions which have discouraged the development of this sort of study and those conditions which could encourage it. The committee itself would, of course, have to be broadly interdisciplinary.

If the efforts of such a committee were successful, its ultimate contribution to the future of science in this country could be more profound than its predecessors whose concerns were with pure scientific curricula. Its actions could be a first step toward a more general understanding of a key element in modern civilization, a step toward that necessary insight referred to by Glass which comes from studying "the right thing at the right time."

PHILIP F. PALMEDO

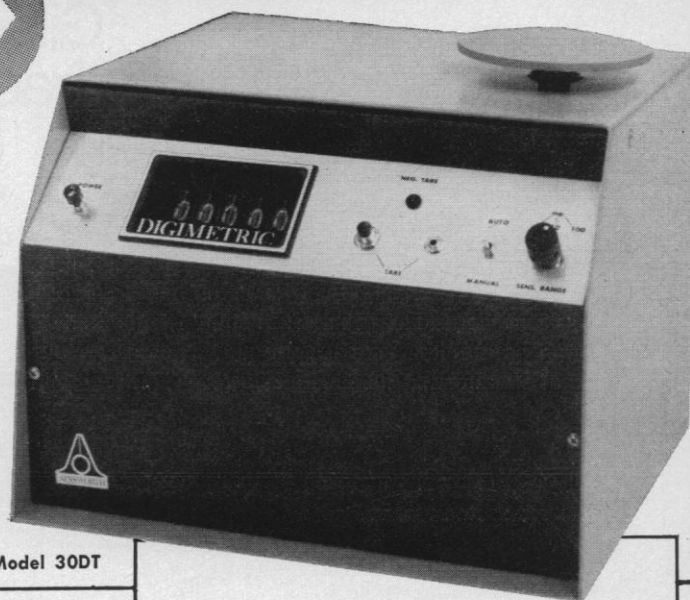
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