

THE TECHNOLOGICAL REVOLUTION: HUMAN AND SOCIAL ECOLOGY*

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Barry Commoner spoke of the unwitting hazards of scientific technology. I want to talk about the unwitting hazards of social and economic policy. Mr. Commoner spoke of the necessity for value judgments relating the natural sciences to society. I would like to focus on the need for social science itself to be more conscious of its needs for value judgments and for relation to the society, and I would do so by focusing and concentrating on what is to me a terrible paradox: with the best intention in the world, desiring to abolish poverty (as I think we honestly do) and without any malevolence whatsoever, we are currently spending more money to promote poverty than to abolish it.

I would like to state the evidence for my assertion, and explain this incredible fact that some years after the declaration of an unconditional war on poverty, more federal money promotes poverty than abolishes it. First, I will document it; second I will treat this incredible paradox as a problem for policy-makers, particularly in colleges and universities; and finally, I will narrow the challenge even more specifically into a challenge to higher education in the United States.

So, first of all, the evidence: the federal agricultural programs were begun in the 1930's with a good social purpose, the best in the world; but one of the consequences of the way in which we spent literally tens of billions of dollars for agricultural subsidies since the 1930's was to drive millions of uneducated, illiterate, black and white poor people off of the farms of the South and into the ghettos and the slums of the cities of the South, North, East, and West.

As a matter of fact, last week the Wall Street Journal in an article on the editorial page noted that in the last two years the subsidies to cotton alone have been 1.8 billion dollars. The basically rich cotton farmers (the corporate farmers, because that is who gets the agricultural subsidies) got in two years a subsidy equal to one year of the Poverty Program. And the Wall Street Journal is hardly a radical, revolutionary source. As the Wall Street Journal said, everyone in Washington knows that one of the uses to which that 1.8 billion dollars is put -- and, perhaps, the most important social use -- is to finance mechanization, to withdraw land from production, and to force people off of the land and into the cities.

Think for a moment what it means that in Harlem fifty percent of the people were not born there. Think what this means when you consider the problems of civil disorder.

The Kerner Commission on Civil Disorders told us in its summary a rather shocking

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thing: in thirty-one years this society has built eight hundred thousand units of housing for the poor, and in thirty-four years it has financed over ten million units of housing for the middle class and the rich.

Indeed, I submit to you that throughout America's housing programs -- ever since the first one in the 1930's under the New Deal, and certainly since the one in 1949 -- we have given much more lavish subsidies to the middle class and the rich than to the poor, and that the effect of the housing program has unintentionally (because we didn't see the consequences) been to widen the gap between the two and to increase the agony of poverty in the United States.

This was certainly true of urban renewal, particularly under President Eisenhower. Urban renewal in the 1950's was used to aid downtown businessmen, downtown office buildings, downtown department stores, and civic projects; and to remove Negroes and poor people from out of the sight of those institutions. It had an anti-social and counter-productive effect. As a matter of fact, consider the paradox that at the same time the government was "bankrolling" the building of suburbia and thus facilitating the flight of the middle class out of the city under urban renewal, it simultaneously had a program to persuade the middle class to come back into the city. In either case, if you were middle class, you could not lose, and in either case, if you were poor, you had to lose.

And here is a problem of visibility and invisibility in a social sense: the subsidy in housing to the poor is visible. It is a big high-rise segregated barracks. Chicago has the worst one in the United States of America down on the South Side, just a big jail for poor people where poor people can see only poor people. That is visible. We all know about that.

All good, middle class people can feel that they are virtuous and Emersonian because they are not on the dole; and yet, leaving aside the fact that suburbia was built with federal credit, as the Kerner Commission tells us, consider that in 1962 the value of the tax writeoff to the middle class and upper class homebuilder for the interest on his mortgage payment was in dollar terms equal to twice what we spent on public housing. So, not simply agricultural expenditure, but housing expenditure has actually made the access to getting out of poverty more difficult.

Next, I come to that expenditure which is the one truly socialist program which every citizen in the United States wants to support; socializing highways. That is something we can always sell in a society. I once, as a matter of fact, thought that we could get a radical program through the Congress of the United States if we called poor people "cars."

We currently have a fifty billion dollar federal highway program. It was initiated under Eisenhower by the Republican Administration in the 1950's; and yet, as the Manpower Report of 1967 of the United States Department of Labor and the Report of the Council of Economic Advisors in January of 1968 told us, one of the main consequences of that highway expenditure has been to move businesses and middle class people out of the city, to make jobs much more distant from the central city, and to isolate the black and white poor in the central city. Further, if you want to read the report of the McComb Commission in California, one of the consequences of this expenditure of federal highway funds was to incite the riots in Watts; because the transportation system in Los Angeles was built with taxpayers' money for the convenience of those who were not poor. Those who were poor had to rot in their ghettos with the jobs miles away, they didn't have cars, and there was no decent public transportation.

As an example of the governmental socialization of crisis, the National Commission on Inter-Group Relations told us in January of this year that we as a society currently spend more money on the education of wealthy children than on the education of poor children. I am sure you all know the figures. That the lowest expenditures are where? In the rural backwoods of the South where our federal agricultural program -- with its displaced persons aspect -- is sending these children North. The next lowest expenditure is in the slums of the cities, and finally, one goes to the suburbs for the highest expenditure. This is spending tax money upside down.

Isn't it terribly clear that governmental funds should be used for those in greatest need and not for those with greatest opportunity?

Finally, in terms of this federal support to poverty, let me take a most ironic case. It is the largest single antipoverty program we have. Since I have said a few unkind words about President Eisenhower, let me now include President Johnson in the criticism. When the Administration currently tells us how much we are spending on poverty, it uses a statistical trick. It says about twenty-six billion dollars. The trick is that the majority of that money is money contributed by the people themselves. It is Social Security and other programs of an insurance character, not of a governmental grant character. More than that, the irony is that Social Security, our largest single program for giving money to the poor in terms of dollars, is based on a regressive tax system which maldistributes the wealth in the United States. Social Security is cheap insurance for the rich and expensive insurance for the poor; and so here again we have this paradox in our society, that because we did not think of the consequences of the way in which we designed programs, these programs actually make life more difficult for the poor. It is, therefore, possible to say, putting the dollars we actually spend on abolishing poverty here and the dollars we spend on promoting poverty there, that we use more money to promote poverty than to abolish it.

I would suggest in a very brief, sketchy theory that this is not an isolated thing, and it is not something that happens because of the ill will of some people in government who are against the poor. Of course that is not the case. What happens, I believe, is this: in our society in the absence of strong, conscious, and politically powerful counter-measures, governmental interventions will necessarily proceed according to the logic of power and commerce priorities. Government intervention will take on the character of the society; and rather than change the society, the intervention will shore up the society even when the intervention is proclaimed in the name of changing society. The reason for that is simply the reality of power in a society.

For example, let me name for you the chairman and ranking members of the Senate Agricultural Committee which presides over these subsidies that I was talking about. The Chairman is Senator Allen Ellender; the ranking members are Senators Holland, Eastland, and Talmadge; and if you want to know why the agricultural programs tend to favor the rich farmer rather than the poor farmer, that is at least part of the answer. The realities of the political power of the rich farmers in the United States of America are centered in the Senate Agricultural Committee. Or if you want to know why we make some of these incredibly un-thought-out investments in superhighways without considering alternate uses of funds which might also help the poor, it is of some relevance that four of the ten largest corporations in America sell either cars or gas. As a matter of fact, the most amusing case in point, to me, is now taking place in San Diego. San Diego was worried about the problem of transportation. Being a sophisticated city, it

wants a systems analysis of the problems of transportation, and it has hired a private company to give it a systems analysis of its transportation problem. That company is a subsidiary of the Ford Motor Car Company.

Although in the above instance it gets practically humorous, similar things happen, in the absence of strong countermeasures, throughout our society. This leads to the second point I want to make: we must have these countermeasures, and the university has a role to play as one of the forces for those countermeasures.

I think the Administration itself is obviously coming to understand the need for some kind of planning, for some kind of systems analysis. Mr. Gardner, before he left -- we had a review for McNamara when he left but apparently not even a handshake for Mr. Gardner-- was proposing some kind of social cost accounting in the society. But I think even these tentative understandings on the part of the government that we have to see things systematically and in terms of social consequences are much too tame, too cautious, and timid. They rely on the assumption that it can always be done on a basis of consensus, that there need be no conflict involved, that you can hire the Ford Motor Car Company to give you an objective analysis of what you need in the way of a transportation system. This strikes me as an act of faith.

I suggest to you that if we take the idea of social cost accounting, of understanding the social consequences on agricultural programs, or highway programs, or housing programs before we invest the billions of dollars, then we are going to have to make some fairly radical and conflict-laden departures. For example, to change our agricultural program will require challenging certain vested agricultural interests. To change transportation policy might cause some conflict with the Ford Motor Car Company. And in the area of education, if we are going to have true community-of-scholars participation in all of these levels, that might challenge some of the companies which are now coming into the knowledge industry who want to corporatize and systematize and profitize systems analysis.

If the colleges and universities begin to make these judgments, begin to develop measures and criteria of social consequence, we will involve the administrations of the universities and colleges in conflict, perhaps even with some of their donors. I think it is a dangerous business, but it has to be done if we are to escape from this truly obscene situation of spending more money to promote poverty than to abolish it.

So, I would suggest that one of the basic challenges to the university in the coming period is for it to become a center where definitions of social costs and accountability are made. It must become a center to expose these problems, to define these problems, and to suggest alternate ways of dealing with them.

We know, for example, that right now there is a struggle going on in Washington, D.C. over where a road is going to be placed; and perhaps for the first time in human history we actually might build a road and not remove Negroes in a city, because there are people who are aroused and fighting, and some of them are part of the Department of Transportation. We know, for example, that in Baltimore there is an experiment funded by the government called the "Baltimore Concept Team," where the design of a road is being considered not simply by engineers and politicians, but by a task force which is going to include social scientists and psychologists. I think here is an area where the university can make a profound contribution to our society.

We have in America -- and I think it has been extraordinarily useful -- the National Institute of Health. It seems to me that we could well endow with generous federal funds National Institutes of Social Health, in which there would

be socially provided funding for the college and the university to take on this kind of pioneering research.

It might get the institution into trouble with some of its present sources of funding, but finally, I am not suggesting that the scholars on the campus with their Olympian knowledge should look down upon the society and the poor people in it and devise socially good programs for them. I think there is, indeed, a real danger that systems analysis in a bureaucratic and elitist sense could outrage the poor and could outrage the people generally by turning them into ciphers, by making them into IBM cards.

I think, therefore, that if the university is not to become a source of elite definitions and elite decision making and elite concepts, it must, as Barry Commoner suggested, enter into a relationship with the actual organizations of the people. It must break down the walls that so often separate higher education from the masses of people in the society. The university has to be in a relationship, it seems to me, with civil rights organizations, and community action organizations, and neighborhood organizations which don't want to be bulldozed. One thing is true about this society: you can no longer do anything unless you have access to expert knowledge. Everybody needs it. The corporations already have their expert knowledge; City Hall has its expert knowledge; the poor do not. It seems to me that here is another part of the challenge; the university has to bring its knowledge down into these communities and not simply make up definitions of social consequence and social good from on high, but make these definitions in the course of a dialogue with the people who are down there.

For example, there are many colleges and universities which have been think-tanking it for some years for the Army, Navy, Marines, CIA, and many other institutions. How about every college in the United States having in a sense a think-tank, a bank of data, and scholars and expert knowledge available to the people in that community who are engaged in struggle; so that the university does not simply tell the Air Corps what a maximum-rocket policy is, but actually enters into a relationship with a group of people who are a community school board and who want to challenge the Board of Education with their sets of figures and want to challenge what the Board of Education says about the reading level of children in that school. Doesn't the university have a relationship to those people? So, in summary: We know that not simply in the area of biological and life sciences, but in social and economic policy that the most sophisticated techniques employed by sincere and honest men with good purpose can have disastrous consequences. We have to understand that this society for some years has been-- and at this moment still is-- providing tax money to subsidize the very crisis which it deplors; that one of the main agencies of the crisis of the cities, if you will, have been the government of the United States. That government when it made investments tens of billions and even hundreds of billions of dollars in roads and housing and education did so without thought of the social consequences to those less able to defend themselves. It did so according to the priorities of established power in the society, and therefore it did so by making the life of those at the bottom of the society worse.

Defining that reality and seeking ways out seem to be one of the basic challenges that higher education in America today faces. I candidly say that if higher education accepts the challenge, it will necessarily involve itself in disturbing political conflict; but I see no other way out for our society and the crisis which it faces. I do not believe that in accepting this challenge -- and in even being radical and accepting the idea of conflict which it involves -- the university can look down on the poor and hand down the solutions from on high. I think this goes very much along the lines of what Barry Commoner said. This challenge requires, not simply out of an ethical obligation but also precisely in order to begin knowledge and to bring knowledge to people, that the university has to enter into a radically new relationship with groups in the community throughout the United States.