

editorial

Beyond the point of no return

In the lead contribution to our "Letters" department this month (page 9), John Boardman argues that "the ecology movement is a contemporary version of the unrest and unhappiness about the scientific revolution that can be traced back at least as far as . . . the 19th century." His concern that the more extreme, irrational elements of this movement may, in pressing their views, go so far as to erupt into violence is sobering. But putting aside this uneasy vision of tomorrow's headlines, there is little question that it is irrational *per se* in this age to argue that we must choose between science (technology) or ecology.

Certainly it is a fact that in reaching the present levels of population and industrialization the human race has inflicted serious damage on the environment. (One can, however, take issue with the idea that this all happened quite recently by pointing out that in some instances modern technology has merely enabled us to identify problems that have been in existence for many years. Samples of fish preserved 43 years ago have now been found to contain twice the acceptable level of mercury, and recently Britain's Royal College of Physicians, almost 400 years after Sir Walter Raleigh introduced tobacco, has concluded that "smoking is now as important a cause of death as were the great epidemic diseases such as typhoid, cholera, and tuberculosis that affected previous generations in this country.") But what has been done has been done; we have passed a threshold of no return—undesirable quantities of mercury *are* already in the ocean, lead pollutes the atmosphere, and high levels of DDT unfortunately now inhabit our tissues.

Even if it were possible to return to the non-industrial culture that some in the ecology movement advocate, this step would do little to help purge the environment of the quantities of mercury, lead, DDT and other long-lasting poisons that have already been unleashed. Clearly our only hope is to

look to more, and improved, technology to help protect us against the known threats and to head off future problems.

And this is really what the more responsible members of the ecology movement have been asking for— a much improved technology. Fundamentally our environment is in trouble because of too little technology, not too much. In engineering terms, planners have failed to identify and optimize the total systems in which the offending industrial activities are embedded. No one would deny, today, that the environment must be considered an important part of each of these systems. Most would agree also that humanistic values have been taken into account.

There can be no question of choosing between science and ecology. We desperately need the one to provide us with the vastly more comprehensive understanding that will save the other.

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