CORRESPONDENCE

Science and Politics

SIR,—The discussions about Tel Aviv, Vietnam, politics and parish of *Nature*, including the latest ones by Drs Simonen (*Nature*, 241, 487; 1973), Lloyd (*Nature*, 242, 213; 1973) and Rognes (*Nature*, 242, 143; 1973), must ultimately deal with the questions of how scientifically advanced nations have used science and technology politically and militarily to repress the peoples of scientifically less developed countries, and to what extent science and scientists in the more developed countries are responsible for that effect.

It is difficult to find any period, since the time of Francis Bacon, when science was not employed for, or benefited by, repression and exploitation, mainly by Europeans (later joined by Japanese) against other peoples of the world, the Vietnam war being just the latest example. It is remarkable that, during the past, such a repression was accepted by the scientific community almost without a stir. If Dr Lloyd talks about the politics of the 1930s, let us remember what state the indigenous people of Asia, Africa and Oceania and the non-European people of America were then in, and that colonial European powers as well as the United States and Japan then benefited themselves from that state, while Germany was excluded from it. Let us also remember that the "political nemesis of 1939" was precipitated by a culmination of the desperate struggle, both political and economic, among these nations for more benefit in this sense. Certainly Scandinavians were the least involved.

It is, therefore, really remarkable that through Vietnam scientific communities (mostly guided by younger members and students) have finally come to realize this stark reality and have begun to understand the role played by science during the last three centuries. Insofar as the discussion leads to a revelation of this point, the political arguments put forward by the previous correspondents were all in the thick of *Nature's* parish.

In this sense, preaching may be just as important as any other means to achieve a gradual liberation of scientists from the previously held delusions, at least for some time to come. If scientists all over the world realized that their competition for excellence within the rule of "objective" scientific enterprise is instrumental in the political and military control exercised on "subjective"

criteria, and if they could unite world-over to refuse lending their support to the military end, scientists could exert an influence on politics because politics today cannot operate without scientists. The effect of such actions would be significant only if they were staged simultaneously all over the world. To begin with, scientists in scientifically more advanced nations should learn to direct their attention to those who would suffer rather than benefit from science. However, as little research funding would come from such suffering people, it follows that little scientific research into these problems would be practised for some time. What else other than preaching, based on theories, is effective for even slowly breaking this dilemma?

Lastly, could we not count the emergence of a large number of independent non-European nations all over the world during the last 25 years as examples of successful political preaching?

Yours faithfully,

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Research Priorities

SIR,—Your copy of January 19 has just become available here. I was deeply dismayed to learn from your editorial (*Nature*, 241, 153; 1973) of the many people (apart from astrophysicists) who are leading lives of discomfort for lack of a "better understanding of the difference between pulsating stars and other kinds of stars". Here, too, we have many people who are leading lives of discomfort, due to such things as malnutrition and malaria, bilharzia and river blindness. Research, such as a deepening of our understanding of the ecology of the vectors of disease, would probably fall into your category of trivial problems. Both these considerations now make it clear to me why, although it is possible to spend many millions of dollars or pounds upon research in radio astronomy, requests for far more modest assistance to develop research schools in Africa upon the trivial problems falls largely upon deaf ears.

It is my sincere hope that the astronomers will soon solve this problem about pulsating stars and other kinds of stars, not only so that the people of the United Kingdom and the United

States "will find the Universe a more comfortable place in which to live", but also because it might then be possible to spare some research funds in the interests of people with a narrow vista and who would be content if we could make just the world a more comfortable place for them.

Yours faithfully,

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Psychiatric Decisions

SIR,—Szasz (*Nature*, 242, 305; 1973) continues to raise very important issues demonstrating the arbitrary nature of many psychiatric decisions, and the power society invests in psychiatry. He also raises anxieties, however, by his dogmatic response to imponderable questions.

"Ill", for example, is a word meaning different things in different sentences. It is not necessarily stretching it too far, for example, when describing a woman, aged 26, who after the birth of her child seems intent on suicide and slaughter. Yet Szasz seems to imply that she should be allowed to kill herself without medical intervention, and for killing the child she should go to prison *via* the courts.

I personally believe that many philosophical problems about freedom, illness, and responsibility are outrageously neglected by naive practical psychiatrists. Like many physicians, psychologists and scientists, they are for common sense, and spurn philosophizing as irrelevant hot air. Indeed its only advantage is to show how like an artist the complete physician must be. He must make decisions while thinking in a necessarily inadequate language.

The total impact of what a psychiatrist does is what is important. Szasz rightly challenges a simple view, but in remaining human and avoiding where possible coercion, occasionally a psychiatrist is being a better physician by having the courage to use compulsion in the interest of his patient.

Yours faithfully,

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