Social science and the new world order

The Fourth Indira Gandhi symposium last week may not have redefined the good society with precision, but it did succeed in showing that the path into the future is beset with contradictions to be resolved.

New Delhi. Mrs Elena Bonner, widow of Andrei Sakharov, raised one of the few discordant notes at the Fourth Indira Gandhi symposium in New Delhi last week by pleading that there should be no reference to Mr Mikhail Gorbachev in any statement put out by the meeting. Her case was that he had justly become deeply unpopular in what used to be the Soviet Union, and that he should not be accorded credit, but rather contumely, for recent historical events. But the plea was quickly denied by a compatriot, who said she disagreed with every word of it. Mrs Bonner herself seemed unaware that she was asking that history should be rewritten, as it was in Stalin's time.

Mrs Bonner's indiscretion was not the only spectacular instance of stereotype reversal at this meeting of the great, the good and the occasionally rapscallion. Thus Mr Robert McNamara, President John F. Kennedy's Secretary of Defense, who soldiered on through much of the Vietnam War, startled some who had not followed his succeeding career as president of the World Bank with an urgent statement of the case for a nuclear-free world, punctuated by liberal table-banging. In a more minor key, Sir John Kendrew, long a member of the British science establishment, asked that more attention should be paid to the social sciences and to what they have to say about the improvement of society; natural scientists in Britain have hitherto been conspicuous for their scorn of the softer sciences.

The symposium itself, at least in its immediate effect, may have been more instructive for its participants than for those who will in due course read the record of what was said in the three and a half days. The topic, "Redefining the Good Society", chosen by the Indira Gandhi Foundation on the grounds that the world has changed with the ending of the Cold War and the break-up of the Soviet Union, proved to be an opportunity for the participants to reflect generally on the future of mankind. But Dr Kenneth Kaunda, president of Zambia until 1992 and chairman of one of the seven sessions, was so moved by his 40-minute account of his past teenage oppression by the British that he was in tears half-way through. The Prime Minister of India, Mr P. V. Narasimha Rao, may have been more canny than wistful when, in opening the proceedings, he wondered whether "redefining" should not have been replaced by "rediscovering".

What follows is one participant's opinion about which of the several issues raised are likely to endure.

The problem of national (and thus international) security, is one of these, and McNamara's view is the most forceful. Indeed, he has a vision of what the 'new world order' should be: frontiers never changed by force, redress for minorities and ethnic groups deprived (by their governments) of their rights, conflict resolution without the unilateral intervention of major powers, more technical and financial assistance for developing countries and sustainable development for all. McNamara holds that the end of the Cold War does not necessarily mean a return to nineteenth-century power politics; collective security is an alternative.

Controlling strategic weapons is one means to that end. McNamara demanded support for an extension of the arms control agreements negotiated in the past two decades. His audience nodded approval. He told a chilling tale of a series of meetings with Russian counterparts at which it has become plain "how close the world was to nuclear catastrophe" during the Cuban missile crisis of 1962; contrary to US intelligence, 162 Soviet warheads had already been transferred to Cuba and would have been used to repel an expected invasion of the island, with the certainty of subsequent escalation. So, speaking from 30-year-old experience, McNamara wants to work towards a nuclear-free world, to which end he wants the UN Security Council to have powers to coerce unwilling governments to sign the Non-Proliferation Treaty. He mentioned North Korea, to general approval; he did not mention India, thus avoiding certain ructions. But the argument will break out at some stage.

Development is properly another insistent theme, divisible four ways by the orthogonal discontinuous variables of population growth and the rest along one axis and micro- and macro-economic considerations along the other. Everybody agrees that rapid population growth is a curse at both levels; the Indian prime minister, indeed, said as much. Many Indian participants insisted that India's economic growth is regularly cancelled out by population growth. For the past decade, economic growth has averaged 6 per cent compared with population growth of 2.4 per cent a year; the trouble is that inflation accounts for much of the difference and the enlargement of the middle classes may have eaten up what is left, leaving nothing to benefit the poor.

So the hunt is on for techniques other than general and substantial enrichment to engineer the classical demographic transition from a high to a low birth rate, which in India has fallen by a third in 20 years (to 30.2 per thousand). Kerala, the southwestern Indian state with just under 30 million people, is everybody's shining example. Infant mortality (17 per thousand) is less than a quarter of that in the rest of India, the average age of women at marriage is 22 years (compared with 18), the female literacy rate is 87 per cent (twice the national average), the expectation of life at birth is nearly 72 years and, despite an average annual income (in rupees) of just over US$100 a head, the net replacement rate is within a whisker of the magic figure of 1.0.

This example shows that the technology of contraception may be a necessary but is not a sufficient catalyst of the classical demographic transition. That is why the symposium united behind the social science solutions — better public health, sending children (especially girls) to school and what Marjorie Thompson, former chair of Britain's Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, called "the empowerment of women". Can the example be copied elsewhere?

What part does science play in all this? With reservations, the symposium seems to have demonstrated that the developing world still regards science and its intelligent application as its salvation. Has it not, after all, shown that the world can be fed? — part of the powerful case put by Dr Bernard Lown, the Boston cardiologist who helped to win the Nobel Peace prize in 1985 for International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War.

But as on development generally, there is a gulf between the micro- and macro-techno-enthusiasts. The former (indistinguishable from the German Greens, and represented last week by Dr Ekkehart Krippendorff, who is one of them) welcome higher yielding strains of crop plants but insist that not everybody can be as prosperous as "the Americans", who must therefore become poorer in the cause of equity. Others, like Yash Pal, the physicist who borrowed time on other people's satellite transponders to bring educational television to Indian villages, regret the present influence of cable television on India's youth.

Certainly nobody last week held that letting technology rip would solve as many problems as it would create. That is the crux of the case for the social sciences. But last week's representatives of those arts were even more given to generalities than is their everyday habit. Perhaps the next meeting should be in Kerala. **John Maddox**

© 1993 Nature Publishing Group