

correspondence

Technology and politics

SIR,—After making several criticisms of *The Technology of Political Control*, your editorial (14 April, page 577) ends with a conclusion which displays an apparent ignorance of the structural basis of control. Although I accept the admirable sentiment that, “the real need is for scientists who are involved in military and police research to be able to speak up when they see the balance shifting in an unsavoury direction,” the realities of the situation in practice make this suggestion naive. Given the essence and ramifications of such work, it is likely to be covered under the Official Secrets Act and thus government researchers in these areas are forbidden from making their work public.

The writers of the *New Technology of Repression* are among the few scientists who can present unrestricted information on this topic in an informed way. Yet, as the recent search of my house and university room by the Special Branch indicate; no-one who researches in this controversial area can be assured of freedom from interference. It must not be forgotten that scientists are also numbered amongst the victims of the technologies of political control.

Yours faithfully,

STEVE WRIGHT

Department of Politics,
University of Lancaster, UK

‘The Selfish Gene’

SIR,—It is no great surprise that W. D. Hamilton has written such an intemperate letter about my review of *The Selfish Gene* (12 May, page 102). Despite his considerable concrete contribution to the theory of kin selection, Dr Hamilton has himself given way to the lure of unscientific speculation on the biological basis of human history, and is responsible for his fair share of vulgar Darwinising. I will comment on three points in his letter that have appeared frequently in replies to criticisms such as mine. First, despite a string of pejorative comments on my objectivity and the quality of my analysis not a single instance is offered of my mistaken analysis. The reader will be as suspicious as I am that “It would be easy to defend the book and reply to the review point by point” when not a word of defence is offered, but

only 350 words of angry invective.

Second, with great modesty, Dr Hamilton compares himself and his fellow sociobiologists to Darwin, and Dr Dawkins to Huxley. Other biological determinists have recently, in their apologies, compared themselves to Galileo! Everyone with a pet theory thinks himself a Darwin or Galileo, the moment his errors are criticised. But my criticism of Dawkins comes not from an outraged church establishment, but from the solid accumulation of the science of population genetics. The real problem in scientific progress is to distinguish those with a revolutionary new insight into nature from crackpots with delusions of grandeur. Self-advertisement is poor evidence.

Finally, Dr Hamilton confesses that he feels little concern about the basic epistemological questions that are at issue. Rather he feels a great warmth about the “spirit” of Dr Dawkins’ book and the “science” it describes. But it is precisely the substitution of “spirit” for the elements of logical thought that makes *The Selfish Gene* such a worthless piece of vulgarisation. What is revealed by Dr Hamilton’s letter is that Dawkins’ errors are not simply those of an overenthusiastic but naive populariser. They are an accurate reflection, it seems, of the quality of thought of the sociobiologists themselves. We will surely not understand the nature of the world by an excess of spirit and a deficiency of hard thought. Dr Hamilton, Bishop Wilberforce would have been proud of you.

Yours faithfully,

R. C. LEWONTIN

Museum of Comparative Zoology,
Harvard University,
USA

Scotland get its share

SIR,—It is difficult to know whether the letter by D. N. M. Hamilton (28 April, page 770) is meant as a serious contribution or as a joke. If he seriously thinks that those who advise the Medical Research Council state that the Scots believe that the people in London are more deserving of money for research than are the research workers in Scotland, I should have thought he would have drawn this to the attention of the MRC directly and suggested most strongly that they change their advisers.

My department has been generously

supported and assisted by the MRC on the basis of projects submitted to them, and in my many conversations with the administrators in the MRC, I have been left in no doubt that there is considerable regard for the immense amount of scientific activity that is conducted in the scientific centres in Scotland. At no time during any conversation have I been left with the impression that institutions outside London—and particularly those North of the border—are regarded as poor relations. If there should at any time appear to be a departure from the strict correlation between the percentage of population and percentage of MRC money spent in a given area, I suggest that the remedy lies with Dr Hamilton and others who may think with him, to produce research and other programmes which are judged to be well worth supporting from the limited funds which are available to the various grant-giving bodies.

I am not an adviser to the MRC, nor has my view on the distribution of their funds ever been sought, and, in common with the vast majority of research workers, I also have had programmes rejected, but one keeps trying.

Yours faithfully,

P. J. HEALD

Department of Biochemistry,
University of Strathclyde, UK

A plea for hyphens

SIR,—At the risk of sounding pedantic I want to make a plea for a return to the sound practice of writing a hyphen in compound words used adjectivally. Today’s general practice of omitting the hyphen in such adjectives as ‘hormone-induced’ and ‘temperature-sensitive’ is sheer sloppiness and, more seriously, often leads to ambiguity. That almost everyone does it is no excuse. Gowers, to whom lip-service is still being paid, gives very sound advice on the matter of hyphens on page 183–84 of *The Complete Plain Words* (HMSO, London 1973). So do several English and American style manuals and dictionaries.

Yours faithfully,

J. FABER

Hubrecht Laboratory,
Utrecht,
Netherlands