

correspondence

Science and ideology

SIR,—As a typically naive graduate student, I have tended to assume that science should be pursued in a rational and objective fashion and that ideology and political viewpoint have little effect on the scientific truth of a subject. Admittedly, this view stands in contradistinction to the dialectical materialism of Marxism as interpreted by Lysenko, but I have been thoroughly impressed by the advances in human knowledge that have occurred during the past several centuries using Francis Bacon's inductive approach to scientific reasoning.

At any rate, while at the recent annual meeting of the Biophysical Society in New Orleans I noticed that Dr Schwartz had organised a forum 'Racist and sexist implications of sociobiology' (note how the title is free of any ideological predisposition involving connotative and pejorative adjectives). Owing to other commitments, I missed the talk by the geneticist but I did arrive in time to catch the talk by the representative from the Boston Committee Against Racism (which I later decided should be more aptly named the Boston Committee Against Intellectual Freedom).

I had, again in my naiveté, hoped for a rational presentation of the reasons that sociobiology might be on weak scientific grounds. Instead, the talk began with the speaker admitting that he was not an expert in the area and then continuing with the unqualified assertion that the material in Edward O. Wilson's book, *Sociobiology: The New Synthesis* (1975, Harvard Press), was not scientific with the implication that no respectable scientific journal would publish such material. One of his principle objections to the theory was its use of what the speaker termed "anthropomorphism of non-human animals and insects", which, when one cut through the persiflage, meant that he strongly objected to extrapolating observations on hereditary characteristics of insects and animals to man.

It is worth noting that Lysenko used the exact same justification for outlawing medical genetics in the Soviet Union (you should see the verbal persiflage of Marxist rhetoric Lysenko used to 'prove' that human chromosomes could not exist). More mundanely,

some of my rural relatives here in Alabama use a similar rationale to 'prove' that evolution is false—God could not possibly create man along the same tree as other animals.

As the talk progressed, we were subjected to numerous emotive and pejorative terms such as racist, fascist, sexist along with the not-so-subtle hint that anyone who would view the subject from the standpoint of possible scientific validity had to be one of the above. (Reminiscent of the way that Lysenko characterised Soviet biologists who dared believe in Mendelian genetics as "enemies of the people".) The speaker certainly did not believe in a rational scientific approach but preferred to employ connotative, pejorative, obfuscatory, equivocal, circumlocutionary verbal persiflage (*sic*) that, while difficult to follow on a logical level, certainly sounded authoritative and proved even more difficult to refute. Under the circumstances, I can quite clearly see how the Eastern European IQ scare of the early 20th century is somehow related to the scientific validity of sociobiology.

Personally, I have no idea whether or not sociobiology will prove to contain elements of truth. However, I do not believe that one's ideological views are likely to change facts (even though the medieval church suppressed Aristotle's teaching for close to a thousand years because it disagreed with church doctrine). Certainly objecting to 'anthropomorphism' (the speaker's term) solely on the ground that it is objectionable flies in the face of the inductive process on which science is based. The proper approach is to make an extrapolation to man and then design experiments or search for data in an objective fashion that might prove or disprove the hypotheses involved. Unfortunately, I am not optimistic that this is likely to occur given the present political climate not only in the United States but worldwide. I am sure that any data obtained to support either the truth or falsehood of sociobiology, IQ testing or any of the related areas will be denounced by the other side—or in many cases buried under numbers and statistics from which one can, through convolution, draw one's own interpretation of the data (see *Matters Arising, Nature*, 266, 279–281; 1977).

Certainly the fact that the Bio-

physical Society would invite a speaker who was making such an overtly ideological attack speaks poorly for the organisers of the conference. I prefer to listen to my relatives in the rural Deep South discuss how evolution is a Godless bolshevik conspiracy and how Darwin was one of Satan's emissaries. Their tone is admittedly anti-intellectual, but at least it isn't ostentatiously pretentious. If one removes some of the intellectual facade from many of the ersatz scientific debates heard in the areas discussed in this letter, one will find the intellectual content comparable.

Yours faithfully,

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Israel's President

SIR,—Contrary to the belief expressed (9 June, page 486), the office of President of Israel has not always been occupied by a scientist.

The first President, Dr Chaim Weizmann, was a biochemist. He was the first reader in biological chemistry at the University of Manchester and later became Director of the David Seiff Institute at Rehovot—subsequently renamed in his honour.

The second and third Presidents, Itzhak ben Zvi and Zalman Shazar, were primarily both politicians of the establishment, although ben Zvi did do some sociological research on ethnic minorities among the Jews. Before becoming President, ben Zvi was known as a founder, with David ben Gurion, of the Histadrut—the trade union movement. Shazar for many years was a newspaper editor before entering politics and subsequently becoming Minister of Education.

Ephraim Katzir, the fourth and current President, is a biochemist of international repute. He is fortunate that the duties of office as President also enable him not to neglect his scientific career.

Perhaps the message which should be passed on is 'Biochemists Rule . . . OK!'

Yours faithfully,

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