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Nobel Prizes should give encouragement

WITH this year's Nobel Prizes awarded, it may be appropriate now to ask whether there is new ground to be broken in the future by changes in criteria applied to selection for the prizes reflecting changes in the nature of scientific enquiry itself and its relationship to society. Certainly in recent years there has been a cautious and belated recognition of astronomy as a subject appropriate for the physics prize. But there still remain large areas of scientific endeavour yet to be included within the orbit of the prizes, of which the earth sciences is perhaps the most conspicuous example. Within the present terms of award of the prizes these areas are unlikely ever to be recognised by the prize committees.

Many would argue that the prizes ought in any case to be phased out as they represent an outdated reward system, generate a fair amount of bitterness and jealousy, and often convey a spurious air of authority by their award that is misinterpreted not just by the general public but even by the scientists themselves, who should know better. If the prizes are simply seen as the final often belated stamp of approval on a fine piece of work, then these arguments have considerable force. But they surely could be, and (with the exception of the peace prize) rarely are, a way of saying "this activity looks interesting. By awarding it a prize we will be giving it encouragement and will be drawing the attention of a much wider public to it."

It goes without saying that such an approach is much more risky. The work in question may end up in disappointment, and the publicity afforded to it may have been damaging. And much excellent work which at present leads ultimately to the award of a prize will fail to be recognised at the time. But it may well be that an aura of infallibility around the Nobel Prizes could be dispensed with.

As it happens, 1979 would be a particularly appropriate year for the prize committee to explore a new approach. Whatever the expected shortcomings of the United Nations Conference on Science and Technology for Development in Vienna next August, none but the most blinkered will by then be ignorant of the questions being raised about science in and for the developing world. One of the more frequently heard complaints by those involved in scientific work in the developing world is that the seductive attractions of a western-style academic science are too great for too many of the most highly intelligent, who abandon to less competent people the much more immediately relevant problems lacking reward-studded lustre. Nobel Prizes have been one of the ways of conferring this lustre. What could be more appropriate than that in 1979 a serious effort was made to identify work being done in the Third World of wide impact, even if not of exalted scholarship, and give to it an imaginative dose of encouragement. □

Victims of censorship

EVERY week roughly 20,000 copies of *Nature* go into the mail. Of these, rather more than 80% leave the United Kingdom for all parts of the globe from China to Peru. As far as we can tell they all reach their destination (barring the odd few that go astray), with one major exception. Certain countries in Eastern Europe take it upon themselves to censor the incoming mail of their citizens.

The pattern is not uniform; some countries don't bother, others are ruthless. By far the biggest offender is the Soviet Union. When there is any mention of that country in our news pages, whether it is favourable, neutral or critical, copies of that particular issue are often simply thrown away at the border. As a result our Soviet readers see, at best, half of all issues of the journal.

There are ways to try to beat the system, of course, but they are only marginally effective and temporary expedients. What is needed, and what is most unlikely to occur, is for governments given to these extraordinary petty gestures to recognise first that all intelligent scientists in their country know perfectly well much of what they are trying to suppress, and second that one of the most effective ways of crippling the growth of science is to inhibit the free flow of scientific literature. □