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The American Association for the Advancement of Science was founded in 1848 and incorporated in 1874. Its objects are to further the work of scientists, to facilitate cooperation among them, to improve the effectiveness of science in the promotion of human welfare, and to increase public understanding and appreciation of the importance and promise of the methods of science in human progress.

Lost Opportunities

Why do social scientists not take better advantage of major and foreseeable social changes to study the processes and effects that are involved? In its tax reduction program the U.S. is undertaking one of the greatest economic and fiscal experiments in modern history. The President has announced a "war on poverty." Integration is bringing a variety of sweeping changes. There will be practically oriented studies related to these programs, and government agencies are likely to study the public policy aspects. But where are the plans for fundamental or basic research on these changes prior to, during, and after their occurrence in order to gain additional understanding of the social processes involved?

Natural scientists are more forehanded. A solar eclipse is preceded by elaborate preparation in order to gain the maximum possible amount of new information during the fleeting moment of the event itself. The International Geophysical Year included arrangements for a world-wide warning system so that observations of solar flares and other particularly significant events could be coordinated on a world-wide basis. The U.S. Geological Survey maintains an observatory on the rim of Kilauea to study the forewarnings, the active processes, and the subsidence of volcanic eruptions.

This difference between social scientists and other scientists does not exist because of differences in predictability of the events with which they are concerned. Social change cannot be anticipated with the precise timing of an eclipse, but the timing is often more predictable than it is for a volcanic eruption. The difficulty is not lack of money; there is a fair amount available for research in the social sciences. Nor is it entirely slowness in making funds available; the National Science Foundation gave immediate support to a quickly planned study of reactions to the assassination of President Kennedy.

Perhaps the problem is inexperience in tackling such large issues. If so, help is available from a wealth of experience in the planning and coordination of large-scale efforts in other fields; the large survey groups have relevant experience; and a few major universities could give special attention to such studies.

Maybe the reason is lack of interest. Months before the first satellite went into orbit, two or three of us tried to persuade social scientists to plan a study of popular knowledge about space and of attitudes toward human exploration of space, for then, before the first satellite was successfully launched, was the time to start such a study if information on a before-and-after basis was desired. A biologist and a physicist whom we invited to participate were eager to contribute their specialized knowledge to the planning of such a study, but the social scientists we invited all replied that they were too busy or for some other reason could not take part.

The processes and effects of something like the tax reduction program are, of course, exceedingly complex; to study them in their naturalistic setting is not easy. But complexity and difficulty are not peculiar to the social sciences; it is often easier to analyze a process in vitro than in vivo. Some things, however, can be observed only in their natural settings. In not studying them when they occur, social scientists are losing priceless opportunities to learn more about the processes involved in major social change.—D.W.

Science

Lost Opportunities

D. W.

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