Book Reviews

Weeramantry (C.G.) (ed.) *Human Rights and Scientific and Technological Development*, Tokyo, The United Nations University, 1990. 222 pp.
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The essays in this volume examine the relationship between human rights and science and technology. They result from a reference from the UN Commission of Human Rights to the United Nations University, and are written by an interdisciplinary team from all regions of the world. The book was written before the collapse of the Soviet Union and, it would seem, before the Communist regimes in eastern and central Europe were overthrown. These recent events add to the force of the recommendations in the book.

All the authors discuss the ways in which science and technology present a threat to human rights, agree that a good physical environment is an essential part of human rights and show various ways in which interdisciplinary studies are essential. Other themes in the book include the fundamental importance of information technology, ways of controlling technology, participation by ordinary people in the control of technology, and the relationship between policies on technology and human rights. All except one of the essays is concerned with science, technology and development in developing countries. However, Tom Farer shows that these issues are equally relevant to developed countries although they appear in different forms.

The themes likely to be of most interest to the readers of this journal are the structure of the scientific professions, the secrecy surrounding scientific and technological development, the importance of teaching human rights to scientists and technologists, developing codes of conduct, encouraging lawyers to revise existing concepts about property rights and to devise new concepts, structures and procedures for controlling technology, and conveying information and understanding about science and technology to ordinary people.

Shigeru Nakayama questions the belief in free circulation of scientific knowledge among academics as well as in manufacturing and the defence industries. He points to the differing roles of research scientists in industry and defence and regrets, as others have done, the lack of a code of professional conduct for academic scientists. This links with Weeramantry's statement that the scientific conscience needs to be stimulated. Nakayama notes the weaknesses of peer-review in a structure of competing individuals. Several writers stress the importance of teaching human rights to scientists so that the latter consider issues of human rights in their work, their choice of problems to work on, the consequences of their discoveries and the uses to which those discoveries may be put. Hiroko Yamane is among those who note that more attention has been given to the malign effects of scientific and technological developments than to devising ways of ensuring that the benefits of such developments are widely spread.

Most of the authors see popular participation as a means of controlling the use of science and technology. This possibility depends on providing an appropriate scientific education for ordinary people. But this must be a two-way trade. Saneh Chamarik observes peasants are not unwilling to accept new methods and they also have specific and relevant expert knowledge that is too often ignored by 'experts', who are usually foreign and Westerners. The devaluing of such local expertise is, he argues, to deny cultural freedom. Amilcar Herrera points out that existing economic theories, based largely on Western notions of progress, are irrelevant in view of such changes as the development of micro-electronics, the dangers to the environment and the destructiveness of nuclear technology. He argues for according primacy to general social goals and then using technology to support those goals, and for the right of every individual to a useful task in society. Vid Vukasovic proposes that activities which damage the environment

should be forbidden, methods of assessing the impact of technology should be developed and that a better definition of the right to the environment is needed.

Both Yamane and Yo Kubota give an account of the development of UN measures on science, technology and development. Yamane notes that these measures have too often represented 'superficial conceptual compromises' and have been weak on effective enforcement. She finds the key lies in the ways in which human rights link with access to information. The latter forms an aspect of rights to intellectual property and the domination by the developed countries of both the production of micro-electronics and information technology, and the collection and distribution of information and news, discussed by Weeramantry. Nakayama suggests that there should be a right to be ignorant and not to suffer for such ignorance, and that we are exposed to 'information pollution'.

One strength of the volume lies in the many recommendations put forward. While some arguments are familiar and some are couched in general terms – for example, that there should be more grass-roots participation in the assessment of science and technology and decisions about their use – others could be initiated without delay – for example, changes in the training of scientists and technologists to include human rights. Other recommendations are fairly specific, but would require some research in order to make them practicable, for example, a reconsideration by lawyers of concepts of property and especially of intellectual property, such as research findings, new processes, new products and methods, so as to make them generally available where needed at reasonable cost, instead of, as is too often the case now, jealously guarded trade secrets, available, if at all, only at an exorbitant price.

This substantial volume, which regrettably has no index, is the first response to the UN Human Rights Commission's reference. It is a valuable beginning that challenges some unquestioned assumptions about the structures of social, economic, political and legal activity and raises many stimulating and thought-provoking questions.

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