The Impact of Science on Society – Bertrand Russell

Description

http://cognitive-liberty.online/wp-content/uploads/Bertrand-Russels-message-to-the-future-generations-cant-be-more-relevant.mp4

Take first the question of food and population. At present the population of the globe is increasing at the rate of about 20 millions a year. Most of this increase is in Russia and Southeast Asia. The population of Western Europe and the United States is nearly stationary. Meanwhile, the food supply of the world as a whole threatens to diminish, as a result of unwise methods of cultivation and destruction of forests. This is an explosive situation. Left to itself, it must lead to a food shortage and thence to a world war. Technique, however, makes other issues possible.

Vital statistics in the West are dominated by medicine and birth control: the one diminishes the deaths, the other the births. The result is that the average age in the West increases: there is a smaller percentage of young people and a larger percentage of old people. Some people consider that this must have unfortunate results, but speaking as an old person, I am not sure.

The danger of a world shortage of food may be averted for a time by improvements in the technique of agriculture. But, if population continues to increase at the present rate, such improvements cannot long suffice. There will then be two groups, one poor with an increasing population, the other rich with a stationary population. Such a situation can hardly fail to lead to world war. If there is not to be an endless succession of wars, population will have to become stationary throughout the world, and this will probably have to be done, in many countries, as a result of governmental measures. This will require an extension of scientific technique into very intimate matters. There are, however, two other possibilities. War may become so destructive that, at any rate for a time, there is no danger of overpopulation; or the scientific nations may be defeated and anarchy may destroy scientific technique.

Biology is likely to affect human life through the study of heredity. Without science, men have changed domestic animals and food plants enormously in advantageous ways. It may be assumed that they will change them much more, and much more quickly, by bringing the science of genetics to bear. Perhaps, even, it may become possible artificially to induce desirable mutations in genes. (Hitherto the only mutations that can be artificially caused are neutral or harmful.) In any case, it is pretty certain that scientific technique will

very soon effect great improvements in the animals and plants that are useful to man.

When such methods of modifying the congenital character of animals and plants have been pursued long enough to make their success obvious, it is probable that there will be a powerful movement for applying scientific methods to human propagation. There would at first be strong religious and emotional obstacles to the adoption of such a policy. But suppose (say) Russia were able to overcome these obstacles and to breed a race stronger, more intelligent, and more resistant to disease than any race of men that has hitherto existed, and suppose the other nations perceived that unless they followed suit they would be defeated in war, then either the other nations would voluntarily forgo their prejudices, or, after defeat, they would be compelled to forgo them. Any scientific technique, however beastly, is bound to spread if it is useful in war— until such time as men decide that they have had enough of war and will henceforth live in peace. As that day does not seem to be at hand, scientific breeding of human beings must be expected to come about. I shall return to this subject in a later chapter.

Physiology and psychology afford fields for scientific technique which still await development. Two great men, Pavlov and Freud, have laid the foundation. I do not accept the view that they are in any essential conflict, but what structure will be built on their foundations is still in doubt.

I think the subject which will be of most importance politically is mass psychology. Mass psychology is, scientifically speaking, not a very advanced study, and so far its professors have not been in universities: they have been advertisers, politicians, and, above all, dictators. This study is immensely useful to practical men, whether they wish to become rich or to acquire the government. It is, of course, as a science, founded upon individual psychology, but hitherto it has employed rule-of-thumb methods which were based upon a kind of intuitive common sense. Its importance has been enormously increased by the growth of modern methods of propaganda. Of these the most influential is what is called "education." Religion plays a part, though a diminishing one; the press, the cinema, and the radio play an increasing part.

What is essential in mass psychology is the art of persuasion. If you compare a speech of Hitler's with a speech of (say) Edmund Burke, you will see what strides have been made in the art since the eighteenth century. What went wrong formerly was that people had read in books that man is a rational animal, and framed their arguments on this hypothesis. We now know that limelight and a brass band do more to persuade than can be done by the most elegant train of syllogisms. It may be hoped that in time anybody will be able to persuade anybody of anything if he can catch the patient young and is provided by the State with money

and equipment.

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Date Created
June 2019
Author
web45