

Into the Seventies with the Wrong Questions

ORMONDE

“Staring ‘Nineteen Eighty-Four’ in the face, they never discussed the subject

THE 1960's ended not with a bang or a whimper but with a question-mark. As we move into the 1970's, what is in store for us? With increasing uncertainties in the world, there is increasing interest in future-watching.

One such exercise in prognostication was a series of articles by prominent writers, under the heading “Life in 1980,” that appeared in *The Times* during October 1969.

Arthur Koestler led off with a forecast of “The Rule of Mediocracy,” which he defined as “common sense plus inertia.” Thus he does not foresee any brilliant political leadership emerging, although he feels there will be improvements in education, the traffic problem and technology. But he admonishes “Man remains a Janus-faced creature: a genius in mastering nature, a moron in conducting human affairs.” As to the possibility of a major war, he referred to a conference held by *The New Scientist*, looking forward to life in 1984, at which nobody discussed the outbreak of war. “The unimaginable cannot be spoken of,” says Koestler.

Sir Julian Huxley and Max Nicholson joined forces to discuss “Man's Deteriorating Environment.” With our increasing technology, these authors warn, the “technosphere” is threatening earth's “biosphere” and some fundamental adjustments are needed.

Huxley and Nicholson sound the over-population alarm and warn that this will be the biggest problem of the 1980's. “Already such great cities as Calcutta have a population equal to that of Birmingham or Glasgow sleeping nightly in the streets.” Instead of declaring these people surplus, the authors might have better asked why there are no buildings to house them, as there are in cities with more people than Calcutta's three million. However, they are not overly concerned about the population of the United Kingdom, which has a higher density than many of the countries they are worried about (nor does London, much larger than Calcutta, bother them). In fact, they acknowledge that there are substantial reserves of land in England that could be developed, and that, with the drift to the cities, “many country acres are less disturbed than for centuries.”

A similar inspection of “over-populated” countries might have changed their minds if they had waited for the report at the end of the year that world agricultural production in 1969 outstripped population growth.

J. K. Galbraith chose to discuss “The Limits of Super-Power,” which is not so much a forecast as a review of

the last quarter-century of international affairs, especially the confrontation between the U.S.A. and the U.S.S.R. To ease this situation, he would welcome a growing similarity between the two countries—more planning for the U.S.A., more market for the U.S.S.R. He deplors the debate between the two concepts: “Even the academic world has a substantial interest in the differences between planning and the market. It remains the last chapter in all the economics textbooks.”

Why do the economies of the U.S.A. and the U.S.S.R. have to resemble each other in order for the politicians to agree not to kill one another? The Strategic Arms Limitation Talks have managed to proceed without dialectics—or the last chapter of the economics textbook.

Another American, Herman Kahn, looked at “The impact of the Friendly Computer,” referring to the Hudson study of the *Corporation and its Environment*, 1975-1985. We are moving into the computer age and the 1970's should witness an increase of power by a factor of 10,000. “By 1980 the interaction of man and machine should be carried to the point where the two will be able to function in a working partnership in many creative enterprises.” Comforting if true, but even a doubling of productive power has up to now led to trouble, let alone a stunning 10,000-fold increase. Mr. Kahn does admit that, although there will be jobs in skilled and service industries, the computer may not provide opportunities for the unskilled unemployed.

“The Prospect in Space” is Sir Bernard Lovell's theme, and he foresees a manned trip to Mars by 1981 and a “grand tour” of the planets by unmanned space probes because of the favourable conjunction of several planets. Astrologers should have a good time with that, supplying the demand to hear the news of the future on our home planet. Sir Bernard only tells us that there will be increasing competition for control of near space between the U.S.A. and the U.S.S.R. (no need for astrologers to forecast that), and that a “disengagement in Vietnam would create a vacuum in American industry for which the Martian venture seems to be almost ready made.” So Americans will have to take a trip to Mars in order to avoid an industrial depression. Too bad there isn't a solution closer to earth.

Prof. Asa Briggs is concerned with “The Organization of Leisure.” He has no doubt that the 1980's will bring more leisure and a great increase in travel, sport and entertainment. “Play will become business and business

will become play." That will be nice. There will be keener debate about fundamental issues, and experimentation with various life-styles, of which today's hippie sub-culture is an example. There will be a sharper look "toward 2000," and "there will still be a feeling—for many it will be an apprehension—that the biggest changes lie ahead." (We don't have to wait—we're already apprehensive.)

Thus, according to this perspicacious group, the things ahead for us are mediocre government, the easing of the traffic problem, the urgency of the population problem, more technology, especially in computers and space probes, more U.S.A.—U.S.S.R. involvements, and increased leisure. While a survey like this could not be comprehensive, there are other prospects that were conspicuous by their absence.

Even going along with Koestler in not thinking of the possibility of a major war—"the unimaginable is not to be spoken of"—there are enough bad international situations now that cannot be ignored in any look ahead: North-South Vietnam, Israel-Arab world, U.S.S.R.

Red China, and a host of potentially explosive situations, depending mostly on who controls what land.

Also, it does not take much imagination to see that intense economic problems always accompany technological progress. Who does what work and who gets what? How are the increased benefits to be distributed? There is no reason to suppose that conflict over such matters should be less in the future than in the past and present. If anything, it is likely to be greater—yet prophets who foresee more mechanical marvels in the kitchen and more paid holidays never speak of this.

The only distributive suggestion touched upon is a "guaranteed annual income." If government is to do this, how is it to collect the income and how distribute it? The increased dependence upon government poses grave problems such as were suggested by George Orwell in his hair-raising *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Yet our prophets staring that date in the face, never discussed the subject. They might also have shown more concern about how modern data-processing is putting into the hands of government a tool for the increased invading of privacy and the collection of secret files on citizens.

Another trend ignored by the authors is the increasing polarization of attitudes—black vs. white, old vs. young, establishment vs. opposition, left vs. right, nation vs. nation. Nor is the hippie life-style merely an amusing experiment, but one expression of profound discontent with society as it is. There are many other such signs, and they could rend society apart.

What is needed is more attention to these areas, and not merely soothsaying, but also studies and solutions.