

from the editor's desk

Long before an assassin's bullet ignited the violence that left a dozen American cities in shambles last week, *SCIENCE NEWS*' editor in the social and behavioral sciences, Patricia McBroom, launched a series of interviews. Her purpose was to determine what role, if any, these disciplines are prepared to play in relation to the turmoil tearing at the society that is their laboratory. It is a question that is now, tragically, more relevant than ever. (Some of the results of that reporting are presented in this issue, see right and pages 386-390.)

Whether these sciences are prepared for the role they are being asked to play may be an open question. But they are being asked.

The President's Commission on Civil Disorders, in preparing its report on the conditions which lead to riots in the American city, turned to the social sciences for help, with mixed results. And in a spirit of optimism, or desperation, or buckpassing, proposals to increase support for the social sciences, intended to expedite an end to social crisis, are proliferating in Government.

The makers of public policy have, in the last three decades, developed the habit of looking to science for easy answers, much as early monarchs looked to their alchemists and necromancers. Sometimes it works; it did in the pattern-setting World War II development of radar, the proximity fuse and nuclear weapons. Sometimes it does not; money and good intentions are no substitute for the painstaking study and ultimate brilliant synthesis that characterize productive research, laying the base for later—often much later—utilization of its fruits.

The social sciences are being asked, and indeed they may be begging to be asked, to come up in this generation with instant solutions to this generation's crises. The request presumes a potential within the sciences for an immediacy of response; it presumes as well a depth of perception that cuts across barriers of class and culture. Both assumptions, where the ghetto is concerned, may well be out of phase with the real capabilities of the social sciences. The delivery on demand of instant insights from instant research is virtually a denial of the nature of scientific research.

At best, as Miss McBroom's reporting indicates and the riot commission's experience demonstrates, the social sciences today are prepared to offer insights to social crisis. But these, while sophisticated, are often intuitive and general and may well be affected by preconception; to the extent that this is so they can be no better than the insights of such nonscientists as those who made up the commission.

But more is being demanded. The social sciences are being asked for useful data and documentation of the kind normally expected of physics or chemistry. This demand—and the support that is likely to accompany it—may help the social sciences sharpen their skills into tools that can be taken from the laboratory and used in city and suburb.

That the social sciences, through such centers as the Lemberg Center for the Study of Violence at Brandeis University and the Committee on Civil Disorders of the National Institute of Mental Health, are moving in this direction is to their credit. And that movement gives weight to the provisional analyses they are developing.

The sciences may catch up and, out of the cauldron of contemporary society, develop an understanding of the social and personal factors that turn frustration in the face of injustice from constructive to destructive channels. On their ability to do it, in time for their insights to be useful in planning social programs rather than instructive in understanding history, may depend not only their own future as useful scientific disciplines, but the future health of the society they study.

Warren Kornberg

Riot or Rebellion

A sociologist finds the American ghetto in a classic revolt

The shot that killed Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and dropped a pall of smoke and despair over a dozen cities, tore through a set of conditions in the United States that have historically produced revolutions in other nations.

An analysis by a Harvard University sociologist reveals that classic revolt-stirring conditions are very much present in America of the 1960's.

What form the revolution takes—whether violent or quiet—differs from country to country, but the conditions giving rise to revolt are the same. They were present in both French and Russian revolutions; they are present here. "The Negro revolt is a classic case," says Dr. Thomas F. Pettigrew, Harvard professor and consultant to the Civil Rights Commission.

"We are in the stage of mass letdown and discontent," says Dr. Pettigrew. "Something's got to give. There is going to be a revolution, but it could always be a quiet one."

England seemed to be headed for an upheaval after the French Revolution, says Dr. Pettigrew, but it was not violent because the English oligarchy gave ground.

"I don't really expect a French revolution here. . . . but the killing of Dr. King cannot be anything by a stunning reversal," and a further step in the revolutionary process.

Typically, revolutions follow a period of improved living conditions. That very progress sets up four revolt-stirring conditions in nations with large disadvantaged populations; it forces widened economic gaps between the dominant and subordinate classes.

A period of long, slow economic and social progress—the first stage toward revolution—is followed by sudden sharp reversal and crisis—the second stage. "We are now in that ominous second stage," says Dr. Pettigrew. The tragic