Report from America

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Louise Brown—A storm in a petri dish

The news that the 10-year research project of Drs Edwards and Steptoe had resulted in the successful delivery of a healthy baby girl brought a typical outpouring of sentiment, sentimentality, and downright hostility in the American press and other media-channels. It was as though nobody had even *thought* about these matters since Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*. The mix of national responses seems to be the result of a number of conflicting American beliefs or attitudes, such as

- 1) We are indisputably Number One in Science.
- 2) We are sorry, in a way, that that is so, because Science is Dangerous.
- 3) Even if we were not the first to develop the technique, we will be the first to perfect and exploit it.
- 4) But the 'right-to-lifers' seem ambivalent, if not downright hostile, and they represent a powerful political force.
- 5) Are we really for this kind of thing or against it?

The last is the crux of the problem, and the only honest answer as of now is, 'we don't know.' The reason we don't know (in America) is because no *thinking* (of consequence) has been devoted to this topic. Americans are trained to be re-activists, not activists. The attitude runs through the whole educational system, which relies on a Skinnerian, S-R (stimulus-response) theory of learning, operating on the hypothesis that until you are stimulated by something outside yourself, there is never any call to *do* anything or (*a fortiori*) to *think* about anything.

It is as though all the publications stemming from the work of Edwards and Steptoe, over a period of almost a decade, had never been *read*, let alone thought about.¹⁻¹¹ The piece by David Rorvik, in *New York Times Magazine* in 1974, has now, of course, been expanded by this science-fiction writer into a best-selling novel, *In His Image* (which masquerades as an historical report) about the first 'cloned' individual. Hollywood is all around us. It gets more and more difficult to separate fact from fiction, and again the law-courts will have to be brought in to try to make some sense of it all.

The outpouring of emotional stories about Baby Louise ('That Baby!' as *Newsweek Magazine* portrayed her on its cover) has been a sight to behold. Many things are left unsaid, though they are clearly felt:

- 1) Envy at the British success (happily counterbalanced a week or so later by the Atlantic balloon crossing, which helped to bolster national pride),
- 2) Real anxiety about the philosophical and legal implications of 'tampering with nature' to the point where we tamper with the very processes of generation,
- 3) Worry about the number of 'misses' in the technique (forgetting, or not knowing, that nature herself 'misses' at least 50 per cent of the time *after* fertilisation, let alone the infinitely greater number of pre-fertilisation 'misses').

It may be that the American mixed response is typical of the world's. If it should turn out that the *fact* that baby Louise was born was necessary to stimulate good thinking, then so much the better. So far, it has stimulated only very poor-quality thinking. The best article to date was in a daily column by the humorist Art Buchwald, entitled 'Are We Going Down the Tubes?'. He hypothesised about the growth of the test-tube industry and the disastrous effects it might have for population planning. The real joke was that never once did he mention the Petri Dish, or its inventor. Dr Petri must well have been amused, if disappointed.

Taxes and benefits

This country is in the midst of a very powerful anti-taxation movement. It is as though the adage that 'life's only certainties are death and taxes,' now being fought determinedly on the first count, is about to be shown wrong about taxes too, or many of them. The success of the Jarvis initiative on Property Taxes in California ('rates' in Britain) has led to a helterskelter amongst politicians to try to catch up with the mood of the public. If a politician fails in that little task (being in touch with the mood of the voters) he or she fails completely. So everybody is talking about reduced taxation and public spending. Britain was the most powerful nation in the world for more than two centuries. America has held that *not*-altogether welcome position for some two-three decades. We shall have to wait and see if she can hold on. If no more is done to stimulate truly creative thinking, rather than always relying on a population trained only to respond to environmental stimuli (*à la* Skinnerian rodent), then America's decline may be as rapid as was her ascendancy amongst the powerful peoples of the world.

National health insurance

Referring back to my previous analysis ('Prospects for a national health service or for comprehensive health insurance,¹²) I would say that prospects for a National Health Service are now nil, and for Health Insurance not nearly what Carter promised before election. *Something* will surely be enacted in the next twelve months, but it will be a pale shadow of what was promised. Costs will continue to escalate; the fight between the 'Health Industry' (Medicine, Hospitals, Medical Schools, Insurers, Pharmaceutical Industries, Appliance Manufacturers, etc., etc.) and Government (supposedly acting on behalf of the consumer) will grow fiercer year by year. The British NHS has many faults and drawbacks; but it is far better, and much more equitable than anything within sight in the US.

References

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