

Suzuki on science and politics

by Lou MacPhail

Science will be the primary problem that we are going to be dealing with in the near future, according to one of Canada's leading scientific authorities, David Suzuki. He also feels that an ever increasing gap between scientists and the rest of society could lead to some very dangerous situations.

Speaking at the university on December 16 to a small audience comprised mainly of science students, Dr. Suzuki said that science, when applied, is a major issue because it is the primary contributor to the astounding changes that are taking place in our society today. 'For every scientific discovery that has been made in the past there will be dozens in the future...The fact is, that for everyone sitting in this room the most pervasive force affecting our lives is science...It's not not unemployment, it's not inflation.'

What worries Suzuki the most is his feeling that the increasing gap that is being created between society and scientists could make for some 'very dangerous' circumstances. Suzuki said that he had been astounded by both the ignorance of scientists in their limited knowledge of other cultural aspects of the society with which they were dealing with and, in turn, by the ignorance of the masses who are letting science take over their lives.

'I worry that you will be through four years of university and you will still be comparable to ignorant savages who are going to practice this powerful source without any knowledge of history, literature, philosophy or religion...' Suzuki expressed equal concern for the lay public's lack of involvement in issues pertaining to science. 'Those who have aptitudes in art can go through life and justify not knowing science by saying they weren't any good at it in school. That excuse is just a crutch to rationalize irresponsibility.'

'We as voters don't care enough about these issues, like the future of the CANDU Reactor...to make them election issues because we are afraid of science and we feel it is not part of our responsibility.'

Suzuki has always had a 'strong sense of what an enormous privilege the right to vote because his own people were not allowed to vote until 1948, regardless of



David Suzuki spoke in mid-December to residents of Guelph and Elora in an effort to recruit members for Guelph Science Forum, a group that would meet on a regular basis to discuss issues pertaining to science.

whether you were born in this country or not. That's an astounding thing in a country that claims to aspire to democracy. It's a racist thing.'

He feels that his Asian descent was an 'impediment' to him in Canada and as a student he identified very much with the black movement. Although science, particularly the subject of genetics, was his first love, race and civil rights issues were a very important part of his life. After receiving his university education in the United States he claims that it was the racism there that sent back to Canada, for while doing research work at

Oakridge, Tennessee, he was confronted, 'in a very brutal sort of way with the reality of what overt racism means.' In 1961 the blacks there could not even go to a drive-in movie with whites. 'It was a very stark confrontation and I was so repulsed by it that I returned home (to Canada) and never looked back.'

He went to the University of British Columbia in 1963 where he 'lived, ate and slept genetics'. 'It was there that I realized there was a collusion between the two things that I had thought were so important to my life - civil rights and genetics - because it turned out that I discovered science (biology) had been used to justify some of the most terrible acts of racism in North America.'

Suzuki claims that Darwin's theory of survival of the fittest was very convenient for the ruling powers to justify their position and 'social Darwinism' became a very powerful movement in the late 19th century because it was felt that an understanding of evolutionary esteem had been created. Darwinism was supported by some of the finest minds of the day, so it was no surprise when the IQ test was evolved that immigrants were found to rate poorly, with an average IQ of about 70.

Suzuki said that eugenics was used in an attempt to apply genetics to improve racial inferiorities by breeding superior types and discouraging 'inferior types'. It was strongly supported by the geneticists in the early 1900's until the Nazi race doctrine created some controversy over what or who constituted the 'superior types'.

'By the end of the Second World War you find that most geneticists are saying that intermarriage is great and and that the difference between racial groups are a reflection of environment. I suspect that part of that was because the Nazi doctrine was aimed against whites and because the Jewish community had a disproportionate number of scientists who were geneticists. So there was a major shift in

the attitude of the scientific community that had nothing to do with science...It had to do with political and social factors that were happening in the world.'

Suzuki said that this particular example of racism demonstrated that scientists, by virtue of their specialized activity, don't necessarily have any special insight or profound truth to give to society. He has been astounded, not only by the discovery that some of the best minds of the day have, in the past, used their science to justify some of the terrible things that have occurred, but also by the fact that while obtaining his PhD in science, he had not learned a single thing about any of this.

'In the training of science students today there is no sense of application...It terrifies me that science students don't know that science is not in the business of finding truth...you are constantly disproving scientific theory...and if you don't understand history or the tentative nature of your hypothesis, you can get into very dangerous situations. Today's truths are tomorrow's superstitions.'

'I have a very reactionary position on education because I believe that higher education is not a right, it's a privilege, a very expensive privilege that is subsidized primarily for children in middle class and upper income groups. There is a disproportionate subsidy by the poor, the very people whose children have a lower probability of going to university and if you complain about what it costs for you to go to university, for every dollar you put in the taxpayer puts in many more...What you do by going to university is accept a privilege and that carries responsibilities...to get the best education possible and if it doesn't leave you room to take more subjects in history or literature, then you bloody well had better demand that your education is changed. It is your right and responsibility.'

It was the juxtaposition of his two great passions, civil rights and genetics, that lead Suzuki to ask was his responsibilities as a scientist were. He feels that science is a high form of culture like music and art and that a scientist has an obligation to prove that he is good at his work before he deserves support.

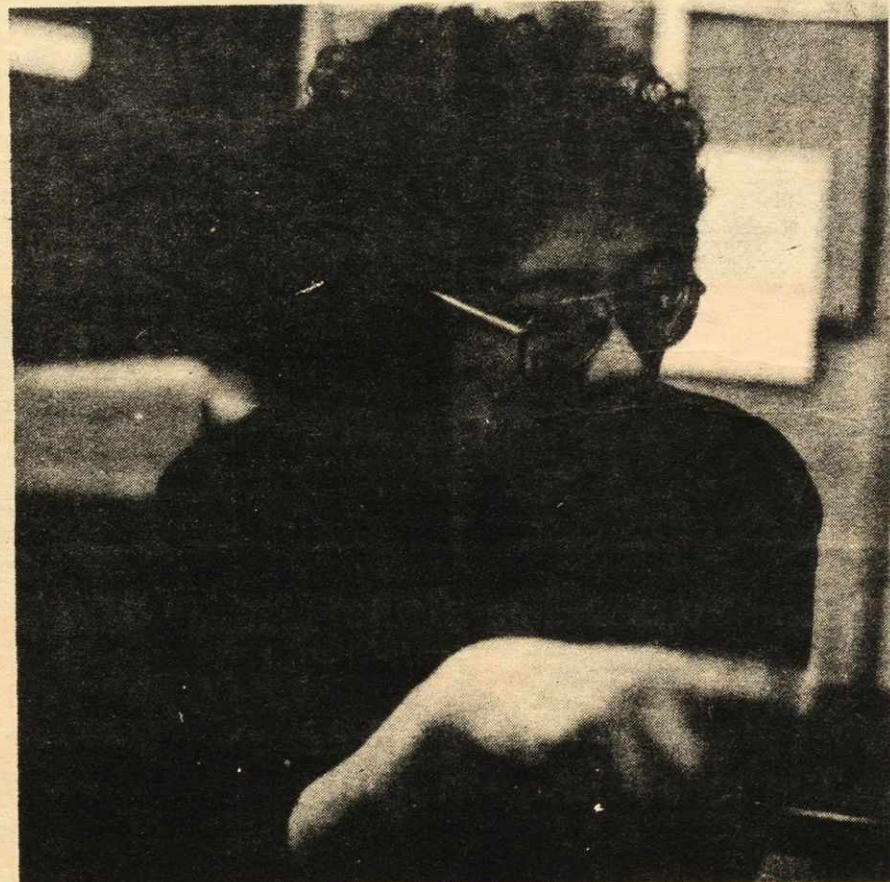
'In the past scientists have had to justify their existence to patrons and there was a long lag between discovery and application.' Suzuki said that because scientists no longer have individual patrons their work has become depersonalized and they have come to feel that they have an inalienable right to grants.

'Scientists, by virtue of being supported by public funds, have an obligation to the public...to explain and justify and indicate to the taxpayer the direction in which the money is going.' Suzuki feels that science is an activity that is being applied very rapidly.

'The myth of Frankenstein is a very appropriate one for twentieth century society. In our society I feel that there is a great need for the de-mystification of this activity we call science. I think that if we are clothed in jargon and special knowledge separated from the public it is very easy to perceive science as Frankensteins.'

Suzuki feels that the lay public must be better informed and more involved with issues concerning science because 'science is the most important factor that changes or effects our lifestyles.' It is for this reason that he is recruiting the residents of medium-sized communities such as Guelph to form science forums that would meet on a regular basis for the discussion of science issues.

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