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Scientific Reformers Hard at Work

THE CIVILIZED world was horrified when the Nazis of Germany instituted a plan to slaughter Jews and other ethnic groups intending to repopulate Europe with a new Germanic master race.

The world is complacently ignoring a somewhat similar movement that is building up, primarily in the United States.

Scientific developments in what is called by the comprehensive title of "genetic engineering" including DNA recombinant research and cloning as means of redesigning plants and animals.

Public indifference to notions some people have about utilizing these discoveries for redesigning human beings may be attributed to publicity about potential benefits to humanity.

Scientists talk of a hormone that may correct growth disorders in children and help treat bone diseases of old people.

In agriculture genetic engineering promises food crops that will grow in salty soils and resist insects without pesticides. Experts talk of all-female cattle herds from hand-picked embryos that will reach the size of elephants to produce more meat and milk.

Profit possibilities are great. Experts predict a $23 billion market for biotechnic medicines and world sales from agricultural biotechnology as high as $100 billion by the year 2000.

In 1974, some California scientists applied for a patent on a technique for moving genetic characteristics of living organisms from one species of life to another. After much litigation the Supreme Court ruled in 1980 that organisms modified in a laboratory could be patented. Since then more than 8,000 biotechnology patents have ben issued and numerous multimillion-dollar firms established.

Now look at another angle. An article in Science Digest (Oct. 1982) quoted Caltech biologist James Bonner as saying that the human race can avoid extinction by using processes of mutation, evolution and selection "to direct human evolution and create a new and better species — a superhuman."

A review of a new book on sociobiology in the current issue of Fortune magazine notes that "Many social scientists have always been instinctive social engineers, hoping to reform society, not just to understand it." Other examples of this attitude might be cited.

When genetic engineering's potentialities were made public, demands for protection against escape of destructive organisms were pushed aside. Scientists stressed the good that might result and complained that regulation might obstruct new discoveries.

Congress is now considering another proposal which would set up a bioethics panel to oversee human experimentation. This presents a dilemma of another federal regulatory agency or the hazard of sociobiologists running loose with tools for remodeling humans to their own ideas and then cloning them.

Most scientists, of course, are responsible dedicated people, but they are reluctant to take any disciplinary action in regard to professional colleagues, no matter how irresponsible.