Inventing Techniques for Accelerating Reforms

Practically every competent observer in America today points with dismay at the need for large-scale social reforms and at the slowness of current methods of achieving them. Speaking at Cornell University recently, John Gardner endorsed the need for broad national reforms; taking his listeners 300 years into the future and looking backward, he said: these changes will finally have been adopted and men will ask why, since all the hardware and knowhow were available, the changes had not been made three centuries earlier.

Social invention is new applied social science. It is the new valid solution of problems in human relations.* When existing social mechanisms are performing badly, and can be changed but slowly, social inventiveness can be directed at the problem of "change-speed," among other things.

Of course, the science of social invention can be used to block improvement, to turn social change to unfruitful waste, or to evil uses. It can also be used to open doors to reforms.

The capability for managing change-speed depends upon:

A.   The aggregation, modification, and invention of techniques for accelerating reforms.

B.   Their application in theory to existing blocked areas, and the communication of these applications to those who ought to know them.

C.   The practical demonstration of techniques "to accelerate the acceleration of change."

Let us list some of the areas that collectively are causing most of the crime, tension, and hostility in American society. We see that invariably some major set of resistances is preventing movement to reform them.

A.   Transportation problems

B.   Tax law inequities, inadequacies, and cumbersomeness

C.   Divorce restrictions and costs

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*Invention is a fully interdisciplinary field. From political science it takes devices of representation and of applying pressure; from law, remedies; from management, "getting things done" in office and shop; from psychology, group dynamics and change-agent theory; from social welfare, client adjustment and environmental protection and improvement; from sociology, social reform and innovation; from pure science and poetry, hypotheses and creativity.

D. Marihuana prohibitions

E. Inefficiency of public services (snow, garbage, mail)

F. Skill inadequacies in a changing technology

G. Antiquated educational techniques

H. Unworkable administrative and curriculum concepts in education

I. Costliness and inadequacy of medical care

J. Bad housing and poor physical environment

K. Racism and other prejudices

L. Obsessive commitments in international relations

M. Alcoholism

In every one of these well-known areas, in addition to the substantive problems themselves, the means for achieving reform are also a vital problem. We need great changes fast, in attitude, in practices, and in laws. In each of these areas one grave problem has to do with the slowness of change. Who can be found today to declare that the suffrage is a major or promising technique for bringing about rapid reform?

This writer recently visited Cambridge University, an 800-year-old institution full of articulate, rational, communicative scholars. Yet "an insignificant minority" of them found existing channels of making their needs and desires known so clogged that they were reduced to the stealthy scrawling of scurrilous political remarks on the beautiful walls of the famous "Backs" of the University.

A Foundation cannot conduct a revolution. But it can, with some chance of success, help solve the problems that a violent revolution seeks to solve with far greater damage. It cannot and need not have greater justification for its existence.

Any such program to devise accelerated methods of social reform could be "a thousand dollar" or "a billion dollar" program. Whatever its size, however, the logical steps by which it should proceed appear to be these:

1. To compile an inventory of means for change, noting for each means its accelerative potential and offering an illustrative example or two of its applicability.

2.   To prepare a "who's who" of the individuals and groups who at
present possess the capacity for impeding or accelerating
particular changes and to inform them regularly of the
"accelerative aspect" of their activity.

3.   To aid many colleges to introduce courses in accelerating
social reform both for ordinary students and for "change
agents" of the country, that is, experts from every field
who need this special "change-speed" training and selected
civic leaders from the aforesaid census of "who's who."

4.   To interview people who are familiar with the means of change
or who seek change in hitherto unnoticed areas, and to learn
what they have to say concerning devices to speed up reform.

5.   To aid research and experimentation on new techniques for
accelerating social reform.

6.   To place experts on techniques of accelerating social reform
in important social policy-making bodies such as government
agencies, educational institutions, business, and voluntary
associations.