Students Should Awaken to the Dangers of Our Modern Industrial Society

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I sometimes think of MIT students as sleepwalkers. In some respects, they are very much so. They study hard. They get the world's best education in science and engineering. They struggle with the usual problems of growing up. They qualify for elite jobs when they graduate. They have the prospect of earning satisfying and successful careers. They expect to marry, to have children, to enjoy the high consumption lifestyle granted for granted by the successful in America. If they think about the human crisis the future holds, they do not let it deflect them from their plans for life.

The crisis is our humanity on a suicidal path. Fundamental change is needed for human survival.

For the past two hundred years we have organized the forums of the Technology and Culture Seminar at MIT. During this time, we have invited recognized authorities to address a considerable number of serious social and environmental problems. In some cases, speakers proposed plausible solutions to the problem being discussed. But in only one or two cases can I remember having any real hope that the solutions would be implemented. Global warming, ozone depletion, pollution, deforestation, desertification, militarism, population growth, and the widening gap between the rich and the poor combine to threaten the human future.

If students act like sleepwalkers in regard to these problems, who can blame them? After all, so does most of the MIT community. So does the United States government. So does American society.

For most of us, it's business as usual. That is, let's hope for economic growth, pursue government grants, work for successful careers, and get through this year and the next without too much personal inconvenience. For many of us, hardship and even inconvenience are not on our agenda.

Years ago, the nuclear weapons strategist Herman Kahn postulated what he called a doomsday machine: a nuclear device built by the United States government. It would accomplish this destruction automatically if anyone dared to attack this country with nuclear weapons. This he considered the ultimate deterrent.

This device has already been built. The button has already been pressed. It will destroy at least a large part of the human community without a single nuclear device being exploded. It will accomplish this destruction with excruciating slowness over the next 100 years or so. Our doomsday machine is the modern industrial system.

Students need to awaken to the fact that the misuse of science and technology serves as a major ingredient in this doomsday system. A just and sustainable society cannot be created without better uses of science and technology. Once awakened, students will commit their lives to these ends.

Perhaps at MIT we are more aware of the many dimensions of the human crisis than anywhere else. But awareness is only the first step, and if we followed by a second step, a futile one. Sara Parkin, a spokesperson for the British Greens, has said, "Our numbness, our lack of outrage, could mean we end up the only species to have minutely monitored our own extinction. What a neatly triumphant joke that would make: 'They saw it coming, but hadn't the wit to stop it happening.'"