

INSTITUT DE BIOLOGIE PHYSICO-CHIMIQUE

FONDATION EDMOND DE ROTHSCHILD

13, RUE PIERRE ET MARIE CURIE, PARIS-V<sup>è</sup>

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Dr. F.H.C. Crick  
Laboratory of Molecular Biology  
University Postgraduate Medical School  
Hills Road  
Cambridge CB2 2QH  
England

Dear Francis,

I feel very guilty for not having replied sooner to your long and lucid letter of March 19. The reason for this is, alas, very trivial : I have been literally submerged by university lectures and the inevitable staff meetings that go along with the life of a university teacher in Paris...

Before I try to answer the various points you have raised in your letter, I think it is important to stress upon two facts.

First, I need hardly say that it is quite an unpleasant position for me to have to defend a principle while feeling that I may hurt the people who are my friends and for whom I have the greatest esteem as well as the most profound admiration. You know me well enough, dear Francis, and since a time long enough, to agree that it costs me a lot to do this!

Second, from a purely historical standpoint, I should like to specify that I have not been at the origin of this campaign against the fact of holding meetings in Greece. I must even honestly recognize that, had I not been asked to join this movement, it would not have occurred to me to initiate something of this sort, precisely because of my intimate relationship with many participants of the Spetsai School ! Yet, when I was solicited for helping at the organization of the movement, I thought it would be dishonest to refuse a support since I had, on several occasions, officially expressed my views on the problem. Incidentally, Bryan Clark perhaps remembers a discussion which Marianne, he and I had in Paris, around May 68 about Septsai. I was then suggesting that the school better takes place in Italy or in Scotland and that an effort be made to invite as many Greek scientists as possible. Whatever it is, if I accepted to serve as a "central mail box" for the nascent committee, this was because I sincerely hoped, at that time, that I could perhaps exert some friendly influence on the various molecular biologists I knew who had then been considered as teachers for the summer school.

.../

Although our "committee" has not held any meeting for a long time, I have ~~been~~ seriously discussing the main ideas expressed in your letter with several members and also, particularly, with Jacques Monod. What I will have to say of course must be regarded as a personal position and does not reflect as yet the general attitude of the committee but it is my strong feeling that it would receive the agreement of the majority of his members. Although almost everybody including myself still is of the opinion that postponing all meetings in Greece (at least for a 12 months, as suggested by Martin Pollock) would have had a strong impact on the government of this country, we consider that the conditions listed in your letter and which you think should be fulfilled before opening the Spetsai School - or any meeting - are excellently defined ; they could in fact serve as guide lines for organizing ~~in~~ the future meetings in countries in which similar political problems are raised.

I am convinced that you had given very serious considerations to the problem of the guarantees before you heard about our movement, but would our action only have led future organizers of meetings to foresee such guarantees, I think it would have been of some use.

In other words, our preference goes for a transient scientific boycott of countries whose present governments have given positive signs of an anti-democratic behaviour. However, there has been some kind of an evolution in the attitude of several members of our committee, including myself, who think that attending or holding meetings in such countries might not be a bad solution either, providing one tries to make officially clear that any publicity from local politicians would lead one to cancel the meeting.

If the attitude of people like Monod and myself, as well as others, might appear less strict than the one adopted in the first move, this has evidently some bearing on the question of how to avoid harming the scientific life in the boycotted country. I need hardly say that we are terribly aware of this difficult problem. Although I do not put in question the intentions and good will of Evangelopoulos - and his argument about reducing the isolation of Greek scientists is, at first sight, a very strong one - I am not hundred per cent convinced that many intellectuals in Greece would not prefer to suffer isolation one more year and see a sign of official condemnation of their political regime. I must nonetheless objectively admit that the best way to form an opinion is to go to Greece! but perhaps it would have been better to send some scientists as individual lecturers, before deciding to open the School.

You are commenting on the dismissal by the Greek Government of academic persons and you say that many of the dismissed scientists appear to have been so for rather good reasons ! May be did we overstate some of the cases (in fact I was not at the origin of this document and made confidence to the person who provided it). Yet, I think you agree that the manner of the dismissal is really what counts, for if such a manner were to become systematic (as it seems to have been for some time) then everybody could be unjustly accused to have neglected his work and be definitively discarded from any academic position.

Your point about trying to cover, in our activities, other countries in Europe is, I think, more important. Among the people who signed our "manifest" you certainly have recognized many who have different political views and come from different social levels. Maybe did I make a mistake by going to the Vatican, as did my friends Jacob, Spiegelman and others, but whatever one may think about the impact of religion in life (I am personally irreligious !) the Vatican is not exerting any brutal political pressure on scientists; if it has ever exerted any pressure at all (at least during the last century !) I completely agree with you, as do many members of our committee, when you list Spain, Portugal, Poland, Eastern Germany as other countries in which the regimes are as oppressives as the Greek one.

It costed me a lot not to attend the European meeting in Madrid but I decided not to go. So did many people around me!

Yet, I realize that such a position as the one we took in regard to the occurrence of meetings in countries like Greece or Spain cannot be more than a symbolic attitude. I am perfectly aware of the fact that such an ostracism cannot be maintained too long nor systematically extended, unless there is a very broad consultation of all the scientists in the world. Otherwise it is obvious that we would end up by going nowhere ....

If we choose to make a special case of Greece and Spain, this is because we were struck by the advertisement of so many meetings in countries where the freedom of expression has recently been so severely hindered.

Our movement has been motivated by the circumstances as could be motivated similar movements facing similar problems in other countries. We do not want to be regarded as a new political party and for this reason we will very soon propose that our committee resigns its existence and functions after having centralized some documents for whoever might wish to consult them.

It may not be a bad idea to envisage a rather broad meeting during which these very general principles could be discussed in order to find out what scientists all over the world think about these problems and whether they think they should be raised or not.

I have tried to give as detailed comments as possible on the various questions raised in your letter. Needless to say that I am at your disposal for any further information or discussion you may wish. Would you so wish it, I would also be prepared to come to Cambridge.

I sincerely wish that you will succeed in establishing active connections with young Greek scientists during the summer.

I am, with kind personal regards,

Sincerely yours,  
*François*  
François Gros

P.S. I have received also a long letter from Sidney. Would you be so kind as showing him this letter if he ~~wants~~ wants it. I am writing him separately.

PS 2 : I have just received your second letter in which you included a statement from the Greek Ambassador that there would be no political interference with the activities of the Spetsai School. We are very grateful for the efforts you have made in this direction and I will try to also send you the documents you need.

Jacques and I, yesterday had a long discussion about the problem of what should be the attitude of scientists in regard to meetings in certain countries. He said he would write to you very soon.

Two questions were raised :

1 - What sort of reference should be used to define a regime as "oppressive" for intellectuals ?

2 - What can be done if we are invited by an academy or by people from a country in which such regimes do exist ?

It is obvious that the first criterion is not easy to define. One can probably set some limits by saying that a regime is "oppressive" if he does not permit freedom of expression that is, if people who live in the country in question have no right nor opportunity to criticize the government and his policy by their own writings, by the channel of local newspapers or by holding meetings. Such a definition has the advantage that it is potentially applicable to any political regime, and therefore does not imply any political engagement of any sort.

What attitude scientists should adopt is, needless to say, their own and personal affair ! The boycott is a solution, which can be adopted under rather acute circumstances. It is not the ideal solution. Monod thinks it is probably better (if one does not run the risk of causing some trouble to the local individuals) to go to the inviting country in question, and to officially or semi officially make clear that one disagrees with the fact that people have no right to express themselves freely ; that whatever the political engagement of a country, people should be free to work on whatever a field or hypothesis they like, that laws should be such as to guarantee that if people are accused of misdemeanour or crimes they have the right to be defended by a regular jurisprudence, etc.... Although I am not yet completely clear as to how effectual such an attitude would be, I share the same view in its main lines .....