

Science Belittled by Arbitrary Power

The National Centre for Scientific Research (CNRS), well known and appreciated by the general public, has as mission scientific innovation and advancement of knowledge. Unfortunately, we have seen for some time a worrying deterioration of its mode of functioning (see article of Alain MAUGER in Le Monde 01/02/07).

I would like to report here, in particular, evidence of aberrational conduct in the management of the CNRS human resources. The statutes of CNRS envisage that a Head of Research, who retires at the legal age of 65, is entitled to a position of « Chercheur Emérite », if he proves that he has made particularly important contributions to research. It should be noted here that an « Emérite » is retired, pensioned and has little or nothing to do with the CNRS budget. Within his Laboratory, an « Emérite » has access to an office, a computer, the library and, exceptionally, to certain mission expenses. To maintain the scientist in his Laboratory thus has little to do with CNRS finances. On the other hand, the « Chercheur Emérite » continues to mentor and teach younger colleagues, passing on his experience and relationships to the scientific community. And his publications, of course, contribute to the visibility of his Laboratory. Be sure, not all researchers who reach retirement age are interested in continuing as a « Chercheur Emérite »; it is only the most motivated who apply.

To become a « Chercheur Emérite » one must make an application, compile a dossier, and have the opinion of the Laboratory Head. The application is very seriously examined by the competent section of the National Committee, which spends much time and effort to analyze and judge the activity of the applicant and his scientific project, before rendering a response. It would seem logical that such a seriously considered process would produce an authoritative decision... but this is not exactly the case. The Head of the Scientific Department of the Laboratory to which the researcher is attached, also gives an opinion, notwithstanding the results on the scientific merit already rendered by the National Committee. The Scientific Department Head does not necessarily know each Department researcher personally and most probably not even his work. By what criteria then, does the Scientific Department Head judge a researcher? Can one simply disavow unanimously approved scientific work because the researcher displeases the Laboratory Head? Must a researcher accept the arbitrary power of a personal « settlement of accounts » at the end of his career?

The process of applying for Emeritat status seems more than a little childish for a researcher who may have 40 years of distinguished career behind him, and who is motivated enough to endure the process. In addition, Emeritat at CNRS is for one 5 years period, while at the University, Emeritat status is more easily applied for and given for 2 years, but it is renewable. That seems more reasonable.

We hear in the « High Spheres » of CNRS that « Emeritat status changes nothing for the researcher ». Then why in this case refuse it? In fact, a highly skilled, brilliant researcher, non-Emérite, does not have any status and is totally deprived of working means. What a waste!

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