

Comment on the interview with Yves Meyer

by DAVID RUELLE (Rutgers, USA & Bures-sur-Yvette, France)



Dear Yves Meyer,

I was very pleased to read the text of your EMS interview as published in the IAMP News Bulletin of July 2011, especially what you say about the French Grandes Ecoles. I am, as you are, in favor of the elitist system of the Ecole Normale and the Ecole Polytechnique, but against the lifelong privileges given to their students. The latter means indeed that there is lifelong discrimination against those who did not graduate from one of the Ecoles. Amusingly (or sadly) many left-wing French intellectuals, who are ready to fight every sort of discrimination, make an exception for that one.

When I came to France in 1964 (after working in Belgium, Switzerland, and the US), the IHÉS was not yet called IHÉS, and it was outside of the French system. Discussions about people to invite were based on scientific quality at the international level; only later would one hear things like: “He is one of the best mathematicians from the Ecole Normale in the last ten years”. After my arrival at the IHÉS, my new colleague Louis Michel took time to tell me who in the French Mathematics and Physics community was from the Ecole Normale, who was from the Ecole Polytechnique (Michel became furious when I got it wrong). I was neither Normale nor Polytechnique and, after a while, I came to realize that this was important for many French people I interacted with (there were some visible exceptions like René Thom, who couldn’t care less, and also, curiously, Jacques-Louis Lions). Later, in the Physics Section of the Académie des Sciences, I was surrounded by two blocs: Saclay-Polytechnique headed by Anatole Abragam, Normale-Ulm headed by Jean Brossel. At one point, Jacques Friedel made a list of “grand prix” awarded in Physics, showing a fair equilibrium between the two blocs. But, as Friedel pointed out, very little was left to people outside the blocks...

Discrimination against various human groups is widespread, and often has tragic consequences. The discrimination in France against those who are not from the Grandes Ecoles may be seen as a rather mild affair, and one is tempted to simply shrug it off. One shouldn’t. I think that Alexander Grothendieck’s tragic story is strongly related to the fact that he was not from the Ecole Normale. If he had been, the IHÉS Director Léon Motchane would have been much more prudent in dealing with him, and he might not have left. Or after he left the IHÉS, probably more effort would have been made by the community to find a suitable position for him.

Thank you again then for publishing your interview. This gave me a chance to repeat things that are fairly well known, but deserve to be discussed rather than just being silently accepted.

David Ruelle

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