

Nuclear research at CNRS :

Beware the academic guard dogs !

by **Thierry Ribault, researcher at CNRS***

Co-author with Nadine Ribault of :

[*Les Sanctuaires de l'abîme – Chronique du désastre de Fukushima*](#) –

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Last March, Alain Fuchs, the chairman of CNRS (The National Center for Scientific Research), entrusted the “mission for citizen science” to Marc Lipinski, director of research at CNRS, and regional councillor from the French green party, Europe Ecology-Les Verts (EE-LV). “Convinced that research can at once remain free and be responsive to social demand,” M. Lipinski considers it “necessary today to establish a dialogue on equal footing between researchers and citizens.” He is to [propose](#) to CNRS “mechanisms, to be implemented in 2014, aimed at favoring dialogue and producing closer ties between research and citizens, mainly taking the form of and organized through associations.”

The announcement of this mission, of which I am not a supporter, has come under virulent attack, particularly from several members of the French Academy of Sciences. As a researcher at CNRS, I consider it my responsibility to shed light on the bad faith of these detractors, whose objective is none other than to exert political pressure on the CNRS, notably in the field of nuclear research and associated activities.

Is “proletarian science” coming back?

In an opinion column published on March 23rd 2013 by L'Union Rationaliste (The Rationalist Union), Edouard Brézin, also a member of the French Academy of Sciences, refers to the mission as “a political manoeuvre” and claims that “the creation of a ‘Citizen Science mission’ by the chair of CNRS, and the entrusting of said mission to Marc Lipinski, a researcher who is simultaneously a politician with responsibilities to a political party, EE-LV, constitutes an error and a danger.”

I should mention here that the the link to the text “created on Saturday March 23rd 2013, written by Edouard Brézin, Hélène Langevin and Michel Henry, for the bureau of the Rationalist Union” was recently replaced by a link to the same text with the authors’ names removed. I have, however, retained a copy of the original PDF of the text with the names of the signatories for the perusal of interested readers.

In their column, E. Brézin and his colleagues denounce the “circumvention of democracy through the supplanting of properly elected democratic institutions by associations whose representativeness is questionable, which are animated by ideological prejudices.” They also are fearful of “making science dependent on being ‘acceptable’ according to external criteria,” with reference to the Stalinist period, when “anathema against bourgeois science or prostration before proletarian science led to consequences of which we are well aware today.”

The anxious rationalists conclude, “We have before us a process that is in fact political, stemming from activists who, as the sad examples from the past show, intend to subordinate science to their concepts under cover of concerns about citizens and society that we certainly all share.”

Frenzied academic activism

We should also mention that the second signatory to that contribution, the nuclear physicist H  l  ne Langevin, is a prominent specialist promoting nuclear energy, as we can see from her 2003 [declarations](#) at the US Department of Energy. At that time, H  l  ne Langevin-Joliot was presented as coming “from a remarkable family of distinguished scientists. Her grandparents, Marie and Pierre Curie, won the Nobel Prize in physics together with Henri Becquerel in 1903, for the discovery of radium. Marie Curie won a second Nobel Prize, in chemistry, in 1911. And Langevin-Joliot’s parents, Ir  ne and Fr  d  ric Joliot-Curie, won a Nobel Prize in chemistry in 1935, for their discovery of artificial radioactivity.” No doubt thanks to her honorable lineage, when asked “What is your message to the public regarding fear of radiation?” Langevin famously replied, “Earth is naturally radioactive; otherwise it would already be a dead planet. We live bathed in radiation from rocks, gas and space, with some 7000 becquerels (the number of nuclei that decay per second) inside our bodies. We get enormous benefits from the use of radiation, especially in medicine. Nuclear energy, whose wastes are highly radioactive, has the advantage of producing no carbon dioxide. I regret that the efforts required in order to handle nuclear waste properly have been underestimated for many years. New programs are being developed seriously now, and I am convinced that safe answers can be found to the problem.”

As for E. Br  zin: first a researcher with the Commissariat    l’  nergie atomique (CEA, Atomic Energy Commissariat, now greenwashed with the opportunistic addition “and Alternative Energies”), then at Electricit   de France (EdF), he is now chair of the administrative council of the CNRS. Together with two other academicians, S  bastien Balibar, physicist at CNRS, and Yves Br  chet, named High-Commissioner of Atomic Energy in September 2012, Br  zin published an article in the newspaper [Lib  ration](#) that had all the earmarks of their feared activist model.

If indeed, as the authors claim, “to proclaim oneself an ecologist is hardly sufficient for pretending to hold the solutions to the difficult issues raised by the concern to protect the future of the planet to the extent possible,” neither is proclaiming oneself an academician sufficient for such a goal.

If further evidence is needed, I can mention the declarations of these three engaged scientists concerning the “dramatic accident of the Fukushima I nuclear plant, which unfolded on such a scale only because of the tsunami,” and from which, “fortunately, no fatality due to radiation has occurred.” They claim, “even in the long run, the number of cancers induced by exposure to radiation is likely to be very limited.” They add, “It is imperative that we draw all the lessons possible from this accident in order to reduce the probability of future accidents, even though we know that all human activities, whether involving dams, coal mines, etc., have entailed and will entail accidents.” On the subject of MOX nuclear fuel, the authors assure us that “to stop producing MOX would be a waste of our resources. But to stop reprocessing goes even further: it would jeopardize our future based on the fourth generation of nuclear reactors. (...) To stop reprocessing would spell not only the end of MOX, but the end of our capacity to satisfy our energy needs without

polluting with greenhouse gas emissions.” The hired fortune-tellers offer this by way of conclusion: “Abandoning nuclear power, which represents about 14% of global electricity, would most certainly doom us to a failure for which future generations will never forgive us.”

Such frenzied academic nuclear activism is scarcely surprising if we recall how, five days before the first explosion of reactor n°1 in Fukushima Daiichi, physicist Sébastien Balibar gave us on [radio](#) evidence of his powers of prediction: “To say that nuclear fission is dirty and dangerous is a rumor which, like many rumors, is false (...) Since the Chernobyl era, the technology of fission reactors has evolved greatly; specifically, there will be no more explosions and no more runaway reactions. (...) Nuclear fission is both sustainable and clean.”

“Why kill the goose that lays the golden egg?”

Yves Bréchet, the third head of the Cerberus guarding the gates to the academy, has already graced us with a fiercely critical [discourse](#) against “the [CRIIRAD](#)¹, the [CRIIGEN](#)², the [CRIIREM](#)³ (...) ‘parallel’ expertise which flourishes on the loss of confidence in official expertise.” By contrast, his praise of organizations such as [GreenFacts](#) and [Sauvons le Climat](#) (Save the climate) knows no bounds: they are models of structures combining “scientific competence and independence.”

Y. Bréchet neglects to mention, however, that GreenFacts is actually financed by such models of independence as Carrefour, Suez and the Belgium chemical group Solvay, while Sauvons le Climat, financed by EdF (Electricité de France) and chaired by Claude Jeandron, vice director of Sustainable Development and Environment at EdF, is fully dedicated to saving the nuclear industry.

So this is the reassuring “alternative” expertise proffered by the hired academicians whose positions are largely echoed by the [Association Française pour l’Information Scientifique](#) (AFIS) (the French Association for Scientific Information). This organization, visibly disgusted that Mr. Lipinski had signed the petition in support of Gilles-Eric Séralini (concerning his recent work on the health effects of GMO) intends to call the CNRS to order: “CNRS is not playing its role when it opens its doors so directly to ideology and to lobbying associations.” When we read the AFIS editors’ edifying questions of the sort “Why kill the goose that lays the golden egg?” the ingenuousness of which borders on piety, we wonder if AFIS would not be better advised to do some household chores within its own doors. “So, what about nuclear? It’s the only energy truly available here and now. It’s the grand solution for decades, even centuries to come. (...) Nuclear plants will be able to produce the clean, cheap, carbon-free, and abundant power that we need and will need in the coming decades as at least a partial successor to the energy sources of the past, for the good and the greatness of France.”

¹ Commission de Recherche et d’Information Indépendantes sur la RADioactivité / Commission for Independent Research and Information about RADiation) is a non-governmental and non-profit organisation, and works to improve information and protection of the public against ionizing radiation/radioactivity. CRIIRAD is often quoted by the media as the “French independent nuclear watchdog group”.

² CRIIGEN (Committee for Research and Independent Information on Genetic Engineering) is an independent non-profit organization of scientific counter-expertise to study GMOs, pesticides and impacts of pollutants on health and environment, and to develop non polluting alternatives.

³ Centre de Recherche et d’Information Indépendantes sur les Rayonnements Electromagnétiques (Independent Research and Information Center on the Electromagnetic Waves and Fields).

Such bursts of national-nuclearism from the detractors of the call for citizen science launched by Mr. Lipinski are in fact rather surprising since Lipinski himself actually speaks the language of power. Flattering himself to be a legitimate representative of “dominated” populations as he leads them to, at most, pronounce themselves on what *already* exists rather than on what *could exist*, the “citizens-sciences dialogue” advocated by Mr. Lipinski has nothing revolutionary about it insofar as the pro-nuclear, pro-GMO, and pro-nanotechnologies orientations already adopted by France are concerned. At most this is a change of regime aimed at making the “social acceptability” of those technological developments more “participatory.” As a matter of fact, representatives of the Europe Ecology-Les Verts Party [hammer home](#) the point that what they are seeking is “a change of regime and certainly not a revolution.” As for Dominique Wolton, director of the Institute of Communication Sciences at CNRS and a supporter of Mr. Lipinski, when he claims that “the citizen must also accept that there is no equality in everything” (CNRS, Le Journal, n°272, p. 37), isn’t he showing the true face of those who, among the socio-greens, are now dedicating themselves to getting the people to swallow quite a few bitter pills under the honorable cover of “respecting multiple legitimate entities”?

Legitimizing the political control of scientific research

One comes to wonder, finally, whether the academic brigades, with E. Brézin, S. Balibar and I. Bréchet as trailblazers, aren’t, through their vociferous denunciations of an *unreal* stalinism of which Mr. Lipinski is suspected to be the agent, aiming to more effectively conceal the *real* stalinization of the CNRS, to which they actively contribute. When the wolf is crying wolf, most certainly the sheep should be worried.

This is evidenced by the fact that academicians repeatedly praise the Office parlementaire d’évaluation des choix scientifiques et techniques (OPECST, Parliamentary Office for the Assessment of Scientific and Technological Choices). OPECST is an “instrument of the Parliament charged with providing information about the consequences of scientific and technological choices so as to guide its decisions.” OPECST, which Mr. Lipinski criticizes euphemistically as “insufficiently open to society,” has been open about its long-time relations with the nuclear industry, primarily though not exclusively through the voice of its vice-chairman, Jean-Yves Le Déaut. This socialist deputy, member of the sponsoring committee of the aforementioned Save the Climate so praised by Y. Bréchet, is among other things on a mission to realize the establishment of a deep geological spent nuclear fuel site in Bure. If, however, the collusions between OPECST and the nucleocracy are widely known, the current desire to assign to OPECST a leading role in defining the directions of scientific research in France, including research at the CNRS, is much less known.

The astounding higher education and research policy [bill](#) put forward by Minister of Research Geneviève Fioraso in response to the wishes expressed in the [official report](#) prepared by OPECST Vice-Chairman Le Déaut aims at establishing a “Strategic Committee for Research” charged with defining “the broad guidelines of national research strategy,” to be developed “under the authority of the Prime Minister and managed by the Minister of Research,” relying on the “expertise of the OPECST.” Accordingly, the future self-proclaimed “pilot” of this “Strategic Committee for Research” will be Ms. Fioraso herself, formerly of the French Commissariat à l’Energie Atomique (CEA), and former member of the OPECST, who [declared](#) in no uncertain terms in a Parliamentary report of October 2010 that the EPR reactor technology “could sustain a meltdown of its core without any danger to anyone” (p. 68). Now we can better understand how the recent fight about the use of the English

language at the university level was actually masking the real issue at stake in that bill: to legitimize tight political control of scientific research.

Scientists are not the only holders of truth

This is why we doubt the sincerity of the academic guardians of science who worry that with the Lipinski mission, “science will be called upon to support political endeavors” when in fact—as recent [silences and deliberate omissions](#) from a CNRS’s [website](#) dedicated to nuclear power confirm—the process is already ongoing.

Similarly, by allocating [50 millions euros](#), via a selection process conducted by a committee under the control of the Ministry of Ecology, the Ministry of Research and the Nuclear Safety Authority, exclusively to scientific projects dealing with “Research in nuclear safety and radioprotection,” managed in “partnership” with the nuclear industry and with large organizations involved in nuclear activities such as the IRSN⁴, CEA and ANDRA⁵, we wonder whether the government is doing anything other than calling upon science to support a political endeavor.

But the detractors of Mr. Lipinski cannot get enough; they persist in transmitting the pressure exerted by political circles, including the OPECST, on a CNRS that is obviously too “citizen-minded” to their taste.

The academic guard dogs [claim](#) that “the object of science is truth and truth cannot be left to the vote.” But they forget that scientists are not the only one to hold and to certify the truth, since truth is not only scientific but also social, moral and human. And we cannot expect to establish such social, moral and human truth through theoretical demonstration or objective knowledge. Rather, we must conquer it through struggles in social life itself. The great questions are in the street, and the truth, certainly, cannot be left to the vote: it must be pulled out of the sharp teeth of the academic pack who make short work of it.

*This English text was edited by Norma Field, author and professor emerita of East Asian Languages & Civilizations, University of Chicago.

⁴ Institute for Radiological Protection and Nuclear Safety.

⁵ National Radioactive Waste Management Agency.