

Freedom to attend scientific meetings

The IUPAP and ICSU initiatives

Unimpeded travel to attend scientific conferences is presently the subject of worldwide concern to scientists; here I would like to comment on my recent experience in organizing the XXV International Colloquium on Group Theoretical Methods in Physics, in Cocoyoc, México, during the first week of August 2004. Having worked on about a dozen international meetings over the past 25 years, I believe it may be useful to detail some hurdles and manifest some thoughts on the post-9/11 situation we face, within the historical context of the previous decades.

During most of the twentieth century, Mexico was a very hospitable country. From the mid-1920's, a steady trickle of immigrants from Europe and the Middle East salted the Mexican mix of peoples. They settled in a newly stable political régime and participated in building the growing infrastructure and economy of the nation. President Lázaro Cárdenas opened the doors of the country to tens of thousands of refugees from Republican Spain during the late 1930's, including 500 war orphans and a generation of brilliant biologists, medical doctors, philologists and cinematographers. A decade later, many survivors from the Holocaust found a new land to live and prosper.

The last wave of welcome refugees occurred after the 9/11/1973 coup in Chile, as the Southern Cone countries fell one after another under right-wing state terror. This migration contained a high proportion of writers and scientists, and greatly contributed to Mexican academic life. In spite of its *sui generis* internal democracy, Mexico's foreign policy was widely respected during the second half of the century; it had kept normal diplomatic relations with Cuba, maintaining non-intervention as guiding principle, and having an active diplomacy regarding the peaceful resolution of controversies —a policy which during the Cold War was quite brave. In 1982, for his rôle in achieving the Tlatelolco nuclear non-proliferation treaty of Latin American countries, Alfonso García Robles was the first Mexican to receive a Nobel Prize —for Peace. During these decades we often had postdocs and researchers from many countries visit our universities, and international scientific meetings were held with hardly any inconvenience.

Human migration has existed before History began, and is likely to continue being a prime shaper of societies; it is the *invisible foot* of Adam Smith's

free market for the distribution of wealth. Efforts to stem the northward flow of the most enterprising individuals from the Northern half of Latin America have succeeded up to some degree, but at the cost of untold effort and suffering. With the background of this tide, the occasional travel of scientists should raise no fear for lowering wages nor for upsetting the ethnic balance of any country. We should remember that *globalization* was first and always practiced within the scientific community, even during the neurotic dichotomy of the Cold War. The twenty-first century opened with another 9/11, this time in 2001, which has affected our community in unforeseen and insidious ways.

Restrictions on travel and scientific communication have been slapped up in the name of protection from terrorist threats and/or mass destruction. In this new régime, contracts of scientific collaboration have been reduced to naught by the inability of colleagues from some *rogue* (and not-so-rogue) countries to return to their jobs, to visit prized institutions, or simply to attend scientific conferences in their fields of research. In the latest issue of this *Index Librorum Prohibitorum*, even scientific articles originating in Cuba and other select countries were excluded from U.S. journals, to the dismay of our community. Fortunately, the efforts of U.S. scientific societies to call their government to better judgment succeeded in this particular instance, but in other categories the ban is still in force.

Mexico has not proved immune to this paranoia. Homeland security has moved “intelligent borders” from the Río Grande to the Río Suchiate, even though it is not clear that there are sufficient people in the country to man such a thing. In a working session with the Senate Human Rights Commission, headed by Miguel Sadot, on June 29, 2004, the commissioner of the Instituto Nacional de Migración (INM), Magdalena Carral, admitted that her 3,600 employees are overwhelmed by the 134% increase in the entry-and-exit paperwork, while facing a 6% reduction in budget [*La Jornada* 30/6/04, p. 21]. So it comes as no surprise that the INM’s work is convulsive and often behind schedule.

According to the new entry rules, the countries of the world have been divided into three categories: The Good, The Bad, and The Ugly —better call them A, B, and C. For the latter (which include India, China, Russia and all former Soviet republics, Cuba, Colombia, and other equally good friends), all visa requests must be initiated from Mexico, and sponsored by an individual (the conference chairman or some other trusty Mexican soul),

who will be personally responsible for any misdeeds or accidents in which a C-professor may indulge. The organizers of scientific meetings had to fill and sign 3 forms (with lengthy, overlapping, and some mistranslated entries), covered by 3 distinct cover letters in Spanish (English not spoken), plus 2 in English for the benefit of the visitor, plus faxes and/or courier mails to the corresponding consulates (just to make sure that they do not misplace the diplomatic valise). All this activity ends up being hectic and exhausting, and costs time not only to the good INM employees who try to do their best, but also for the scientific organizers and their institutes. Of course, any lurking terrorist will be deterred by this impregnable wall of paper, and so will a much greater number of innocent scientists.

The free movement of scientists for the purpose of international collaboration is one of the most important aims of the International Union for Pure and Applied Physics (IUPAP), and a requisite to obtain its sponsorship. We, the organizers of the XXV ICGTMP colloquium adhered to the declarations of the International Conference of Scientific Unions (ICSU), as stated in the ICSU Document Universality of Science (sixth edition, 1989, see www.icsu.org). Mexico is signatory to these agreements and was therefore expected to abide by them, in particular that individuals will not be excluded solely on ground of national origin. All requested visas were granted for XXV ICGTMP participants, and we did see the bureaucratic process being speeded up for the submissions that started with less than the stated 6 weeks of anticipation; however, at no point was IUPAP's Policy on Free Circulation of Scientists explicitly recognized by the authorities in reaching their decision.

We had to process visa requests for eleven C-country participants. Four ended up not coming to the Colloquium; two visas were issued on the opening day of the conference, so one participant came late and the other did not show up; two more had the Mexican visa but discovered they also needed a U.S. visa, which is much harder to get, to fly on a reasonable budget; one Israeli plenary speaker was also delayed, but fortunately had high government connections to get his U.S. visa the next day. Personal attention at the Instituto Nacional de Migración in Cuernavaca was good, but involved six visits, a dozen phone calls, some 18cm of paper, and most of our anguish.

To my mind, it is very easy to verify whether a purported solicitant is a scientist or not, simply by looking into his/her institute's webpage—which can hardly be counterfeited—, or accessing the publications of that author,

or asking some known colleague in the vicinity. The scientific community is rather closely knit and it is nearly impossible to be an impostor with ulterior motives. I did receive three odd letters “*Please extend a letter of invitation so that I can come. . .*” from Nepal, India and Nigeria, without institutional adscription. Of course, these were simply disregarded with no further ado.

Discrimination by race, creed, gender, caste, or even sexual orientation, is considered by honest government officials to be not only politically incorrect, but downright idiotic. Yet citizenship, which is as unimportant as any of the above to limit a scientist’s competence and value, is used as the main or only criterion on who may pass the airport gate and who may not, and by implication, on who is a suspicious human being and who is not. It is remarkable that this criterion is shared both by official policies and by the terrorists gangs in their forays —and also by a few remaining ignorant bigots among the population— but certainly not within the learned communities. Diplomatic reciprocity is often invoked as the reason to turn the poor countries of the world into a lunatic hall of mirrors, and is flaunted completely vis-à-vis our far richer neighbors.

Since we do not yet live in Utopia, the most (and least) that we can do is to insist, through the many channels at our disposition, on the incongruence of discrimination based on passport origin with the aims and practice of scientific meetings. We should continue to promote the recognition that freedom of movement is a requirement for our endeavors, and keep alive the hope that this freedom will be some day recognized as a basic human right. Certainly, the present migratory policies of Mexico belie our visitor’s impressions on their Mexican colleagues as being savvy and congenial at work, and hospitable at home. That is the reality. We deplore the present restrictions and keep our eyes on the task to maintain the freedom of communication within our scientific community.