

Chapter 7. "Publish!"

"No scientist will admit that voting plays a role in his subject. Facts, logic, and methodology alone decide – this is what the fairy-tale tells us".

P. Feyerabend. *Against method* (1975).

"Black magic" at Inserm!

A few weeks after the visit of the laboratory, the team of Clamart could read the report of the Specialized scientific commission of Inserm. The authors of this report indicated first of all:

"The Commission wanted to separate these "classical" activities from HD [*high dilutions*], electromagnetic transfer. Indeed, these experiments cannot be analyzed with our current knowledge and were reproduced in no laboratory until today.."

Then they commented on the experiment they attended and specified their approach:

"The delegation attended an experiment which does not contradict the results announced by Jacques Benveniste. An experiment having no statistical value, the delegation of visit proposed the following approach, in three points [...]:

- 1) Do not include, for the moment, the HD program, transfer, in the demand of junior-laboratory contract, so as to judge this one with criteria comparable to those adopted for the evaluation of the other demands of junior-laboratory contracts.
- 2) To establish in coordination with G. Charpak (for the physics aspect) and E. Coraboef, a network of 3 to 4 laboratories committed to analyze the reproducibility of the experiment that we attended (even other experiments) in other laboratories after designing a protocol with J. Benveniste. [...]
- 3) Reintegration of the program HD and transfer within the junior-laboratory contract if the conclusions of the network are positive.

We can understand the exceptional character of the approach by the concern to analyze a series of experiments with modesty and honesty which cannot be explained in the present state of our

knowledge. If a scientific approach is maintained in this affair, this can only help the applicants, INSERM and the scientific community in general.”¹

The report of the Specialized scientific commission was thus rather positive and constructive, even if it remained very careful. This report had the merit to try to maintain the debate on a scientific ground. Maybe it is the consequence that a delegation of this commission went on the ground and participated in an experiment. But, from its Olympe, the Scientific council, the highest scientific authority of Inserm, did not have the same view. It did not retain the proposal “to maintain a scientific approach” and preferred to examine the overall demand without separating the various activities. The result was then the rejection of the demand in spite of the favorable report of the commission:

“When they presented their report to the commission of specialists, the members of the delegation collided with the skepticism of their colleagues. The conflict achieved its paroxysm at the Scientific council of INSERM, where a mandarin spoke about "black magic" for the transmission experiments.² Members of council certainly tried to plead the caution ("and if accidentally he was right? Inserm would not recover from it!"), but the vote was unfavourable to the demand of the researchers.”³

Indeed in the session report of July 9th, 1993 chaired by Claude Amiel, the Scientific council wrote:

“The demand of junior-laboratory contract presented by Mrs Yolène Thomas was the object of a favorable report on the immunotoxicologic part. Concerning the part on high dilutions and transfer of pharmacological activities, the general attitude was very reserved not due to some “official science” but, at least for some members of council, while waiting for a possible independent confirmation of the reported effects and/or from the result of the ongoing scientific evaluation.”

The vote which followed the debate rejected the demand by 15 votes “against”, 9 votes “for” and 3 abstentions. The way the question had been discussed by the Scientific council however left a bitter taste to some participants. So, a member of this council, a “classic” pharmacologist, who voted in favour of the creation of the junior-laboratory contract, wrote shortly after to J. Benveniste to report him his feeling after the evaluation of the team of Clamart. About the scientific discussion which should have taken place, he wrote:

“Two-third of participants around the table spoke before the vote. In my opinion, there was no debate; only the assertion of convictions for some of them, or a desire to dodge for the others.

With or without quotation marks, does an “official science” exist? The procedures of evaluation being driven by scientists who are judges and defendants, there is some natural tendency that projects and people tend to decline toward an average which does not cause many comments. We evolve towards a posh research. The rules of this research are very suitable for people who pursue a career; they deprive those who are attracted by the playful aspect of the scientific adventure. Everyone is free to choose.

By way of conclusion, I do not have the feeling that Mrs Thomas' dossier, and more generally the dossier of your group, received the enlightened evaluation for which any scientist is entitled to expect from an institution which claims to be professional. The fact that seems more serious for me is that this evaluation was not tolerant.”⁴

“Inserm supports a discovery only after its confirmation”

When he received the official decision of rejection, J. Benveniste wrote a long letter to P. Lazar where he pointed out the inconsistencies of this decision. For him the report of the session of the Scientific council and the decision of P. Lazar to close the laboratory by refusing the demand of junior-laboratory contract “show the bankruptcy of a crucial activity of the Institute, the evaluation, and announces the death of INSERM in its current functioning. The overdetermination, that is the subordination of the managers to other factors than scientific objectivity, can partly explain – but does not justify – the inconsistency of their decisions.”⁵ Evoking the presence of G. Charpak and E. Coraboeuf during the visit of the delegation of the specialized Commission, he specified:

“These experts did not raise the slightest objection to our protocols and participated in a very positive transmission experiment “which does not contradict the results announced by Jacques Benveniste” [...]. G. Charpak proposed cooperation between his team and INSERM on electromagnetic transmission of molecular activities. [...]”

Then, concerning the question of the “contaminated serum”:

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"This contamination, whose we abundantly showed the *in vitro* spectacular effect, is sufficiently threatening for public health so that an investigation, implemented in this moment by the Drug agency and financed by the National network of public health, is entrusted to the same team that sees disappearing at the same time its resources. How will this decision be interpreted by the opinion, and possibly, by the justice, if not as an obstacle in the demonstration of the truth, an attempt to silence the troublemakers? [...]"

As for the decision which means in fact closing the laboratory:

"The negative decision is taken "while waiting for a possible independent confirmation of the reported effects and/or from the result of the on-going scientific evaluation" (report of session of the Scientific commission). We thus wait for the confirmation (probably abroad), while taking measures of intimidation ("see what will happen to you, if you go beyond the allowed limits") and, while waiting, one removes their resources to the researchers responsible of a discovery which, according to the Nobel prize-winner, would be "the most important since Newton", researchers to whom one asks at the same time to demonstrate their discovery (with what?) INSERM supports a discovery only after confirmation. [...] Indeed "the on-going evaluation" for which we wait is the one of G. Charpak who has to experience himself (the 200 experiments that we made are not enough!), that is 2 or 3 working hours. INSERM was not able to organize that for 5 years? A unique example of auto-asserted incapacity.

These inconsistencies and incongruities demonstrate that our research in biology, such as it is managed since several decades, is dedicated to the reproduction of established results or to the "discovery" of predicted facts, but rejects any advance that is disturbing for the certainties and for the dominant pressure groups. They contribute to the failures and to the dysfunctions of our biomedical organization."

"Nobody questions your intelligence, your sincerity, your boldness, your panache"

With the letter that officially announced the closure of the Unit 200 of Inserm, P. Lazar answered to J. Benveniste:

"I received your letter of last August 5th and I meditated on it. I would want to repeat to you in all simplicity, and without much

hope to be heard, that INSERM and its director, obviously, respect you and are attached to you. Nobody questions your intelligence, your sincerity, your boldness, your panache. What simply lacks today – what you had not neglected to do for your previous works, those that gave you an international scientific reputation – the endorsement of your peers, materialized by scientific publications in high-level journals (on your current subjects of preoccupation; about the others, I know that you continue publishing!)

Publish, and there is no reason that you will not be recognized for this again. Eighteen months of credit assigned by INSERM beyond 31/dec/93 leave you enough time and the material possibility.

A research institution cannot work on other bases. Allow me, once again, to remind it to you.”⁶

About the order to be published, J. Benveniste answered to P. Lazar:

“After Nature’s offensive and the June-1940-like defeat of the French scientific "community", there is at present NO possibility of publishing in a journal with a sufficient level on dilutions/transmission. See the article that I sent to *Lancet* and their answer. *Nature* succeeded to discredit a scientist with an "international reputation" in spite of the absence of scientific criticism and the unworthiness of the methods that have been used. There is no doubt that if I was helped normally by the scientists, in particular from my institute, far below what one expects from a team committed in a usual scientific competition, for example creation of a scientific committee, encouragement of collaborations [...], invitations at conferences in the teams and the institutes, etc., my group, INSERM and our country would have materialized this very important scientific advance long ago. [...]

Nothing of that is made and you tell me: "Publish". I am unarmed in the arena with the lions, the crowd of the blind and the deaf are on terraces with thumbs down. Yours is horizontal: "Go on, old chap, don't be afraid!" ”⁷

Then, on October 18th, J. Benveniste wrote another long letter to P. Lazar where he expressed his disappointment for the lack of sufficient help from him in the past although there were many occasions “even if it meant playing a double game, one of the two being friendship”. He reminded him the reflection that P. Lazar would have made to a journalist: “Submitted to a considerable

pressure of the two lobbies who manage French research in biology, I did what I could to leave his chances with Benveniste".⁸

And, shortly after the decision of Inserm, as told by M. Schiff:

"Ten days later, the person in charge of staff mobility at INSERM came to accelerate the desertification of the laboratory by strongly advising to the personnel to quickly choose another workplace at the risk of being later forced to accept an appointment which would not suit them."⁹

"For the right to "heresy" "

In December 1993, one remembers that the journal *Nature* published an article signed by Hirst *et al* claiming that they did not confirm the results of the article of *Nature* 1988 (cf. first part, Chapter 20). After the decision of Inserm, this publication was a new nasty shot for J. Benveniste. He then drafted a text that he sent to about thirty personalities, indicating in a letter of introduction:

"Following the publication of the article of *Nature* [...], a true attack to scientific integrity, it appears that the time has come to take an initiative. This text aims at favoring the return of the researchers, but also the decision-makers, to normal behavior and procedures.

[...] This battle is not only ours. If we win it, it will not be easy anymore to stifle ideas and people who disturb."¹⁰

The text which appeared in *Le Monde* resumed the main lines of the initial project of J. Benveniste and it was signed by twelve personalities.¹¹ In fact, the journal *Nature* was no longer mentioned. It is necessary to say that the text was finally published only in March 1994. On the other hand, the emphasis was placed on the Unit 200 of Inserm "[which is] closed, its human and material resources are scattered, in spite of its high level asserted by scientific authorities."¹² The signatories demanded "the establishment of a scientific debate instead of the anathemas and threats on the professional situation and the worthiness of the researchers, which deprive them of any means to defend their work." Finally, they raised the question of the mission of the researcher:

"Is it not the mission of the researcher to explore different, sometimes risky, ways? Yet, structural rigidity, obedience to the dogmas, deification of reason until nonsense, everything today pushes towards this normative conformity, which is a cause of decline and abandonment, sometimes dramatic, and not only in science."

Acknowledging that they were not competent to judge the scientific merits of the case, the signatories concluded: “We do not want to take part in the scientific debate. We plead for the freedom to search, that is to think, for the right for "heresy" ”.

Feeling targeted by this text, the direction of Inserm released a communique on the same day in which it specified that U200 was not closed due to insufficiency of scientific production and presented the closure of the laboratory as a simple administrative measure “as for all INSERM units after twelve years of mandate of their director”. It added that the creation of a new unit at the end of twelve years was possible “provided a sufficient number of researchers, what was no more the case for Doctor Benveniste, several researchers having voluntarily left his laboratory” and that “it is inaccurate to say that "human and material resources have been scattered" because Doctor Benveniste continues to work at his premises, with the same equipment and the same credits as last year until June 30th, 1995.”

It concluded by wishing:

“that the efforts to give Doctor Benveniste all the chances to demonstrate his assertions would be simply recognized. It wished that the legitimate desire to express a moral support for a colleague in trouble would be not translated by a misleading description of his effective situation on this day.”¹³

P. Lazar was nevertheless in a good position to know that the question was not simply material, but related with the refusal of high-level journals to publish these experiments. Indeed, as commented by the journalist F. Nouchi in *Le Monde*:

“The question is actually to know if the scientific community leaves doctor Benveniste with "all chances to demonstrate his assertions". If one considers the virtual impossibility for [Benveniste] to publish his works in high-level international scientific journals, we can regret that the direction of INSERM gives only such an administrative answer. This situation led nevertheless the director of INSERM Mr Lazar to write a letter¹⁴ few weeks ago to the director of the scientific journal *Nature*, asking him to be willing to open his columns to Doctor Benveniste. There is today no response to this letter.”

Not being able to count on the support of his administration “to demonstrate his assertions”, J. Benveniste once again rushed into the quest for

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the “proof” and the “crucial” experiment, with the risk of reproducing the situation of 1988 with *Nature*.

Notes of end of chapter

¹ Inserm report of May 7th, 1993 of the Specialized scientific commission n°5 (President: Joël Bockaert).

² A new example of reference to magic (see first part) uttered here by Bertrand Jordan, geneticist.

³ M. Schiff. Un cas de censure dans la science, p. 124.

⁴ Letter of Jean-Louis C. to J. Benveniste of October 5th, 1993.

⁵ Letter of J. Benveniste to P. Lazar of August 5th, 1993 (modified on September 3rd).

⁶ Letter of P. Lazar to J. Benveniste of September 15th, 1993.

⁷ Letter of J. Benveniste to P. Lazar of September 21st, 1993.

⁸ Letter of J. Benveniste to P. Lazar of October 18th, 1993.

⁹ M. Schiff. Un cas de censure dans la science, p. 126.

¹⁰ Letter of J. Benveniste of December 13th, 1993.

¹¹ The text was signed by Jean Baudrillard (sociologist and philosopher), Jean-Claude Carrière (writer, scenarist), Roland Castro (architect), Pierre Godeau (professor of internal medicine, Pitié-Salpêtrière hospital), Georges Kiejman (lawyer), Henri Laborit (researcher and writer), René Lenoir (former State secretary), Edgar Morin (sociologist and philosopher), Giuliano Preparata (physicist), Jacques Testart (biologist, Inserm), Haroun Tazieff (vulcanologist), Edouard Zarifian (psychiatrist).

¹² Des personnalités apportent leur soutien au docteur Jacques Benveniste [*Personalities bring their support for doctor Jacques Benveniste*]. *Le Monde* of March 1st, 1994.

¹³ L'affaire de la Mémoire de l'eau. L'INSERM affirme avoir laissé à M. Benveniste toutes ses chances de « démontrer ses assertions ». *Le Monde*, March 5th, 1994.

¹⁴ This letter of P. Lazar to J. Maddox followed upon a demand of J. Benveniste where he asked for the support of the Director of Inserm to make publish by *Nature* a corrective letter after the article of Hirst *et al* of December 1993 in the same journal (See Chapter 20 First part).