

September 30, 1958

Dear Professor Birkhoff:

I appreciated very highly your kindness in writing me as fully as you did and in sending me a copy of the address which you made at the meeting. This I am returning, and I am sorry that I was unable to read it sooner, for I was only able to read it this morning - so much for the details connected with the beginning of a new year under the troubled conditions which now afflict the whole world.

The address is an extraordinarily interesting one and shows such progress as is almost incredible in a relatively brief period of time. I was glad to notice that you dwelt upon the enormous need for mathematicians of modern training not only in research institutions but in colleges, high schools, etc. I do not share your view that we are anywhere near the point of saturation with first-rate men, though undoubtedly it will occasionally happen that a first-rate man is not promoted as rapidly as might be fair and desirable.

The only paragraph in your address to which I should take exception is the one which I have marked on page 15. As far as my own observations go, even the foreign professors of mathematics in this country like Courant have the keenest possible sense of responsibility for placing promising young American mathematicians, and I certainly have never heard of a case in which a second-rate

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or slightly inferior foreigner was preferred to a really first-rate American, nor is the number of positions available for Americans certain or likely to be lessened. Precisely the contrary is the case, as is the case with fashions in women's hats and clothes. Every woman who brings to this country a new model in the way of gown or millinery from Paris instead of diminishing the demand for high-grade American work in this field increases it, because every woman who sees a well dressed woman wants to reach the same standard of style and taste. Now this is equally true of mathematics, physics, archaeology, etc. What Fine did, for example, here at Princeton and what was started at Harvard by your predecessors made jobs. It did not restrict them. If we could place fifty Einsteins in America, we would probably within the next few years create a demand from other institutions for several hundred, and this is also true of Birkhoff's and Veblen's and Moores. Let us keep firmly in front of our eyes our real goal, namely, the development of mathematics, not American mathematics or any other specific brand of mathematics, just simply mathematics. It can be developed only by having first-rate men in important posts, and every time an institution gets one first-rate man he creates opportunities for other first-rate men, and every such center that is developed stimulates some other institution to do likewise. Hitler has played into our hands and is still doing it like the mad man that he is. I am sorry for Germany. I am glad for the United States. I will undertake to get a position within a reasonable time for any really first-rate American mathematician, and I will also undertake simultaneously to do the same for any first-rate foreign mathematician whom Hitler may dismiss. The more the merrier. The one thing that we need in this country is to beware of mediocrity, whether it is of American or European origin - that is immaterial.

With all good wishes to you and your family,

Ever sincerely,

ABRAHAM FLEXNER

Professor George D. Birkhoff

30 Woodrow Wilson Hall

HARVARD UNIVERSITY
CAMBRIDGE

FACULTY OF ARTS AND SCIENCES
OFFICE OF THE DEAN

20 UNIVERSITY HALL

September 15, 1938

Dr. Abraham Flexner, Director
Institute for Advanced Study
Princeton, New Jersey

Dear Dr. Flexner:

I was much interested to get your letter of inquiry about what I was reported to have said in New York. As a matter of fact, I had no time to read the part of the address referred to in the New York papers. However, some interested colleague had evidently seen an advance copy of the address as it appeared in Volume II of the Semi-Centennial Publications and had brought it to the attention of some reporter. At any rate the reporter came up to me and asked for my attitude and I simply referred him to the Volume and did not see him again.

When I wrote my article last June I had not the least thought in the world that any part of it would get into our newspapers and had simply mentioned the influx from Europe as one of the general features of our very promising mathematical situation. I think you will be interested to see the manuscript of the first part of my address* (the rest being more technical and of no interest in this connection) and so am sending you a duplicate copy which you may return at your leisure. The article was written wholly without suggestions or advice, and, in fact, there was no one who even knew of my general plan when I sent off the article. Inasmuch as it was desired to publish the Semi-Centennial Addresses in book form by the time of the meeting in September, I delegated much authority to the editorial committee. In consequence you will find a few modifications in the actual printed paper, some of which were added in the interest of accuracy and others represent the considered opinion of the editors. If I had been here, I would have stopped to argue one or two of the decisions but it was simply too much trouble to do so from abroad.

I hope and believe that you will find the point of view which I actually set forth a reasonable one. Everything that I said was with a view to still further strengthening our general mathematical situation.

It is fair, I think, to say that some of our younger American mathematicians are not receiving as rapid promotion or as ideal conditions of work as might be desirable for their best development, for example, Professor D.H. Lehmer of Lehigh University, who is a very promising young man indeed. However, I do not regard this slowing down as having become a very serious problem but I do feel too that the conditions of work are of primary importance for a young man; an Osgood or a Kellogg at Harvard as contrasted with an Osgood or a Kellogg at Lehigh become with the years qualitatively different phenomena.

* Especially p. 13 ff.

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Perhaps some time we can have a chat together about this
and other matters of mutual interest inasmuch as the subject is
a pretty complicated one.

With very kindest remembrances,

Sincerely yours,

George D. Birkhoff

September 12, 1938

Dear Professor Birkhoff:

I read in the Times the other day a brief account of an address in which you are quoted as raising serious objection to the immigration of foreign mathematicians to this country on the ground that American mathematicians are thus kept out of positions. Under ordinary circumstances I should have paid no attention at all to this statement, for I know how often speakers are misquoted, but yesterday a prominent Princetonian stopped me and asked me whether I had seen the statement and he greatly deplored its publication.

I wonder whether the statement, as published, really represents fairly your point of view and opinion. If it does not, then of course there is no more to be said on the subject. If, however, it does, I feel constrained to take issue with you. We need in this country thousands of modern mathematicians to teach in universities, colleges and high schools - a demand that far exceeds the supply. Isn't it better that our young people should be trained by first-rate foreigners rather than by second- or third-rate Americans? Let me take the Institute for Advanced Study as an example. Were we wise or unwise to bring into its faculty Einstein, Weyl and von Neumann? Do you know of any Americans who have been kept out of positions by reason of their appointment? The argument can be carried a step farther. von Neumann spoke to me last year about the possibility of your own promising son coming to the Institute for a year or part of a year, providing we could make a grant towards his expenses, and I was greatly pleased and hoped very much that the arrangement could be made in his case as it was in the case of Stone and Walsh. Now it is obvious that every grant we make to a person who is on salary at

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Harvard prevents our making a grant to some American who may be out of a position. Would you think it wise for us to deny contact to Walsh, Stone or your son in order that we might help persons inferior to them who happened to be/^{Americans} out of a position?

Is it not true that our real interest, and the real interest of the American Mathematical Society, is the development of mathematics and that anything we can do - even if we should bring men from the Moon or Mercury - that promises to further and hasten the development of mathematics is sound policy? We have proceeded upon that theory in every school which is now contained in the Institute for Advanced Study. As you will notice from the most recent bulletin, a copy of which I am sending you, mathematicians have been brought here from almost every country in the world - not primarily, of course, because they happened to be Japanese or Poles or English or Americans, but because they were mathematicians of promise who will profit by the opportunities here offered and will be ultimately all the better for their students by reason of that fact. Despite the number of foreigners who have come to America, the American of equal ability invariably gets the preference.

In this era of hate and prejudice it seems to me of the utmost importance that no American should utter any opinion calculated to fan an anti-foreign feeling. On the contrary, though I should have been happier if there had been no Hitler and Mussolini, I confess I am delighted as an American that we have profited so largely by the folly of these fanatics.

With all good wishes and high regard,

Sincerely yours,

Professor George D. Birkhoff
Harvard University
Cambridge, Massachusetts

ABRAHAM FLEXNER