

THE INSTITUTE FOR ADVANCED STUDY
PRINCETON, NEW JERSEY 08540

SCHOOL OF MATHEMATICS

November 7, 1973

To: The Governance Committee, I.A.S.

From: A. Weil

In the business world, it is perhaps a sign of weakness for an enterprise to adhere to its original purpose for more than a few decades, and a sign of strength for it to undergo a basic reorientation from time to time, through expansion, purchases, mergers or other means.

In the financial world, "flexibility" is regarded as a virtue; ever to "enrich and diversify" one's holdings is the key to prosperity. It is the privilege of an art collector to do the same and to trade valuable items for others more consonant with his own changed taste or with current trends. Whether a museum has the moral right (as distinct from the legal right) to behave similarly is more questionable, and it has been questioned.

In the academic world, on the other hand, the best institutions are also those that have survived for centuries, undergoing only the slowest and most gradual changes, while of course remaining faithful to purposes which are understood to be of permanent value. Their survival has invariably rested upon a long history of successful resistance against encroachment from non-academic authorities - whether political, ecclesiastical or administrative. This fact does not seem to have been present to the mind of the founders of the I.A.S. Had they envisaged future conflicts between trustees, director and faculty, they would presumably have provided other means of resolving them than the naked exercise of power. When the Institut des Hautes Etudes Scientifiques was started in Bures near Paris, the founder, who modelled it on the I.A.S. and took counsel from Dr. Oppenheimer, had sense enough to devise statutes guaranteeing the independence of the faculty in academic matters.

Our Governance Committee might well ask for a copy of those statutes and give them some consideration; but, as this young institute has yet to prove its capacity for long-range survival, it is perhaps more appropriate to seek inspiration from some old institutions which in part have served as a model for ours. Dr. Oppenheimer was fond of referring to All Souls' College in Oxford. Partly because the writer happens to be a Frenchman, partly for more substantial reasons, it seems best to describe

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briefly how the Collège de France is organized. It has now more than four centuries of existence; during the greater part of this period, it has enjoyed unparalleled prestige within the French academic world. Its basic structure has changed very little for the last 150 years.

Just as ours, it is a research institution; professors have an obligation to give lectures, but always on the subject of their own research. There is a wide gamut of subjects, scientific and scholarly (including now the so-called social sciences); but (just as at the I.A.S.), as it grants no degrees or diplomas, there is no need for "coverage." Just as is (or should be) the case at the I.A.S., the basic principle is intellectual excellence in scholarly and scientific disciplines.

At the head of the Collège de France, there is an "administrator," elected by the professors from among themselves as a "primus inter pares." Usually he stays in office for many years, sometimes until retirement; the rather considerable authority which he enjoys in practice is not derived from any statute, but rests entirely upon the trust of his colleagues. His main official duty is to deal with the Ministry of Education; the Ministry does nothing except provide operating funds; any attempt on its part to interfere with academic matters at the Collège would immediately raise an outcry in the public press, and would be treated as a major political affair.

Appointments are made by Faculty vote. According to the statutes, the Faculty must in each case send two names to the Ministry, indicating its own preference; I can remember only one case when an attempt was made (not by a professor at the Collège) to have the choice of the Faculty reversed by the Ministry; it was not successful.

Every appointment has to be passed on by the full Faculty. There are two votes: the first one is on the subject, the second one on the name of the incumbent. Of course, when voting on the subject, the Faculty is well aware who the candidates are, and lets itself be guided largely by their intellectual stature. In no case is the successor to a professor chosen before the latter's retirement; indeed such a practice is unheard of in the institutions of the old world. When a professor retires, it is usual (particularly if his field is one of the more traditional ones, e.g. mathematics) to replace him within approximately the same field, sometimes after consulting him. There is no obligation to do this, however; it happens not infrequently that a chair is "borrowed" from one field in favor of another one, if there happens to be no convincing way of filling a vacancy at a given moment. Thus the transfer of a professorship from one field to another, once the Faculty has so decided, offers no problem; it is only in the case of the creation of an additional chair that the Ministry must intervene, but only in order to fund it. It has never

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occurred to any of the College professors to question the right of all his colleagues (whatever their field may be) to vote on all appointments. In the vast majority of cases, the choice is between candidates within the same field, and the Faculty follows the advice of those most competent to judge; nevertheless, control by the whole Faculty tends to discourage nepotism or favoritism of all kinds. On occasion, disputes on appointments can be as vehement as anywhere else in the academic world; but the Faculty vote puts an end to them. College professors have learnt to live with this system and appreciate its virtues - not the least of which is freedom from outside interference, which would hardly be the same if there was a need for arbitration between opposing factions or schools. I venture to suggest that the Institute might do worse than adopt some of its main features, if it is to survive for more than a few more years as an academic institution of the highest standing.

cc: Faculty and Trustees