

Tibor Schatteles:

THE VARIOUS NOBEL PRIZES



The widespread discussions about the most recent Nobel Prizes, and of course about the politically relevant Peace Prize, has revealed the popular ignorance about the heritage of Swedish scientist Alfred Nobel. The annual granting of the Prize by the *Swedish Academy of Sciences* to distinguished physicists, chemists and medical scientists, whose achievements often transcend narrow professional recognition, is something fundamentally different from the *Norwegian Parliament's*, the *Storting's*, awarding of the Peace Prize. And this not simply because we just don't often agree with it (or, as some of us, enthusiastically applaud it) but for essential reasons which also contradict the intentions of Alfred Nobel. The difference has something to do with the history of Scandinavia. Did you ever think of this? Well, you know of course where Scandinavia is on the map, wherefore I will dare to make a very short description of the origins of the problem. It is absolutely necessary if you want to get a clear idea about the political game caused by the Prize. And if my subsequent introductory phrases seem to state something "everybody knows", please continue the reading with confidence because you may find in it something that escaped your attention.

So, the distinguished Swedish scientist and industrialist Alfred Nobel who died in 1896, bequeathed much of his considerable fortune as the financial basis for five different prizes. And while he entrusted the Swedish Academy to award annually the scientific prizes under very rigorous conditions, to be shortly reviewed in sequence, he asked that the Peace Prize be awarded by the Norwegian Parliament. Why the difference? Well, here comes in that Scandinavian history with which I threatened in the previous paragraph. I will mitigate the threat by being very short.

Throughout the centuries the history of that European peninsula was marred by many wars by which the king of Sweden tried to obtain (he often *did* obtain) sovereignty over the entire peninsula, while the people of Norway fought for independence. When the Prize[s] was [were] created, the Treaty of Kiel, 1814, was still in place, and until 1905 Norway was not independent. However, during almost a whole century, Norway's situation improved by the creation and then gradual perfection of a national parliamentary system. Except that the country, not enjoying full sovereignty, could not engage in an independent foreign policy. ***And this is the reason why Alfred Nobel wanted the Storting to award peace prizes!*** He thought, and declared, that under such conditions the Prize will be protected from the political bias of a government engaged in foreign policy. This sounded very wise, except that in 1905, nine years after Nobel's death, Norway gained full sovereignty which always goes with some foreign-policy bias. Ever since it is still the special committee named by the Storting which has the decisive word, except that the bias changed throughout history.

In the beginning, matters of international law, which was and is[?] the law of war and peace, were considered when experts in this field were chosen for the prize.

Thus the first(!) Peace Prize was granted to Henry Dunant. Who was he? Most people know that he was the founder of the International Red Cross. Few know that he was among the first Christian Zionists. This is a long story but it may be of interest to quote short sections from his letter addressed on Dec. 5, 1867 - not later! - to the Jewish Chronicle in London. After introducing himself to the editor as the founder of the RC, Dunant writes: "At present, sir, I am engaged in another work, for which I hope you will not feel less interest than for that which I just referred, the more so as it concerns Palestine, the country made over by God to the glorious people of which you have the honour of being a member ... I hope that you will likewise acquaint me with the names and addresses of persons in England, whom you may believe to be inclined to sympathize with the moral and economical re-constitution of the ancient patrimony of the Hebrews; for our work, supported by the greatest and most aristocratic names among Christians, sympathizes not the less, nay, before all, with the Israelites whose rights to Palestine are superior to all others." And you probably know that the IRC created by the efforts of Henry Dunant, first Nobel Peace Prize winner(!), has granted full membership to Israel only in 2006. But let us see what happened later with that Prize.

Later, victims of warmongering regimes also got the prize. Thus in 1933, the very naive and honest German pacifist Carl von Ossietzki was honoured with the prize. He ended his days in 1939 in a prison of Hitler. It is that same Hitler who on January 30, 1937, decreed that no German national could accept *any* Nobel Prize. But things changed along with the changes of the Norwegian government's political ambitions. No detailed analysis of this evolution will be given here, but it may not be useless to recall that the parliament in the land of Quisling granted also the prize to Hitler admirer and propagandist Anwar Sadat (the papers didn't tell you this about him), just as to Arafat, the Egyptian terrorist chieftain, proclaimed "Palestinian". Very likely the recently celebrated author Knut Hamsun would have warmly welcomed such decisions. Not Henry Dunant. And certainly not Alfred Nobel! A study, still not systematically done, of the mechanics of choice of the Storting committee in recent decades, and its relations to Norway's foreign policy, could offer you an insight into the characteristics of the company with which Mr. Obama was associated. (Would you also associate him with the same company?)

The original intention of the creator of the Peace Prize was perverted, yet most decent people don't know about this. They don't know that Alfred Nobel meant the award to be granted by an authority **not** involved in foreign policy in a direct, active fashion. But another element of perversion is implicit in the fact that the prestige of the *other(!)* Nobel prizes is propagandistically expanded to the one granted to Sadat, Arafat, and quite a few others whose naming would cause trouble to the writer of these lines. Still, it is most important to give a short outline of the difference.

So, let us continue with the three scientific prizes: physics, chemistry and medicine. One essential fact to be mentioned is that these prizes are to be given

by The Swedish Academy of Sciences only for achievements/discoveries which have been **experimentally proven**. This provision was probably at the roots of the original postponement of the prize awarded somewhat later to Max Planck and Albert Einstein. Quantum and relativity theories were still too new to be instantly granted the recognition they later enjoyed. Indeed, Einstein received his award also for a long list of contributions which only indirectly, though inevitably, are related to relativity. **He did not receive the prize for the theory of relativity.** This is a clear proof that little subjectivity or even ideological bias could penetrate these choices.

Now, Alfred Nobel could not find a scientifically precise criterion for the Peace Prize. Therefore he has chosen a political body which, under the historically given conditions, was supposed to be less biased in foreign policy matters. But then, you will now hardly find any democratically elected parliament which is as dedicated to the support of terrorism-promoted dictatorships as the Storting. Does it also say something about Norway's voters?

What about the remaining two prizes? The Literature Prize cannot be subjected to any "experimental proof". This was, of course, known from the very beginning. Therefore some subjectivity, mostly honest and unprejudiced, may have come through when choices were made. Only we have to be aware of that, because one or another prize for literary excellence may be and has been used or abused by people who are less noble than the founder of the Prize. Such is the case with the 2009 prize awarded to Ms. Herta Muller, an author and poet of German ethnicity and native of Romania. Nobody would contest the remarkable quality of her writing, but it was not that which was in the center of attention of many enthusiastic commentators. A most recently published article by a French author praises the Committee for having remembered a *minorité oubliée*. Whereby the reader, uninformed about the sufferings of the Romanian-Germans, may be inclined never to learn about how enthusiastically many of them volunteered for the SS. Volunteered(!), not conscripted by law! Some off-literary comments may come also from those who would have gladly volunteered or, to play it safe, encouraged others to do so. So, just don't make any confusion between the works of the prized authors and the choices of commentators.

And economics? Well, the Prize was not created by Alfred Nobel but by the Bank of Sweden "in the memory of Alfred Nobel" seventy years after his death. It is nice to honour the memory of a great man and useful to encourage also economists to produce something of value. Though it was not intended by Alfred Nobel, it neither does pervert his clearly formulated intentions as do the managers of the "Peace Prize" in our days. Of course, the choice cannot be made according to experimental criteria as in the case of "positive sciences" even though some laureates, in their more optimistic moments, may claim that "*positive economics is, or can be, an 'objective' science, in precisely the same sense as any of the physical sciences*". Well, well, the intention has to be appreciated. It is so much better than granting peace prizes to mass murderers and their direct or indirect supporters!