

Letter to the Editor

Science and politics in Chile

SIR: The article titled 'Biochemistry in Chile' which appeared in *TIBS*, Sept. 1981¹ provides important information on the development of the biological sciences in that country. However, the authors, Chilean biochemists R. Vicuña and O. Cori, do not describe the unprecedented political and economic conditions there and the consequent changes in the Chilean university system in general and in science in particular. This letter addresses the situation of science in Chile in the broader context which is essential to any meaningful discussion of it.

Following the military coup in September 1973 many scientists and professionals were summarily dismissed from the universities. Some were held in concentration camps and some tortured^{2,15-17}. Within a few months 30-35% of all university faculty members were expelled for political reasons^{3,4}. These actions, unprecedented since the creation of the University of Chile over 100 years ago, resulted in a massive reduction of academic activities by scientists and other professionals. Subsequent waves of dismissals have been nominally ascribed to lack of funds, but dismissals have been heaviest among academics considered politically unreliable⁴. Consequently, the few available university positions are clearly politically restricted.

In addition to the initial repression and continuing waves of dismissals, the universities are subordinated to the military^{5,6}. There has been a succession of university presidents drawn from the Armed Forces and administrators are often chosen according to their allegiance to the regime rather than professional qualifications. Appointments at every level, even student admissions, are subject to revision by the National Intelligence Center (CNI), the secret police. Many scientists, including some of recognized international standing, have been barred from university positions because they are considered 'security risks' by the CNI. The pervasive presence of CNI informers on campuses⁷ many officially titled 'administrative coordinators', has made academic life treacherous. Students

or faculty expressing divergent views on university policies face dismissals, beatings, imprisonment or forced internal or external exile⁸. In view of the above, the assertion by Vicuña and Cori that CONICYT (the Chilean National Research Council) 'came under political management' in 1971, seems either naive or in bad faith. A detailed account of the repression now prevalent in Chilean universities is contained in the document written in Chile by 77 noted and courageous academics who are members of the Andres Bello Cultural Association⁹.

The absence of academic freedom in the universities and human rights in the country as a whole, make support by those few international agencies which fund training in biological sciences more difficult to maintain. A case in point is the exchange program mentioned by Vicuña and Cori which was financed by the Ford Foundation from 1965-1978, between the University of California and the University of Chile. It is true that training and research associations have since continued between the two Universities, albeit on a greatly reduced scale. However, what the authors neglect to mention is that several Chilean scientists trained in the program were denied employment at the University of Chile because

of their political views. Thus, the basic intention of the original program is undermined and cannot help but make foundations think twice about entering upon similar programs with Chile in the future.

We do not share Vicuña's and Cori's optimism regarding the new employment trends among scientifically trained personnel in private industry. The Junta's economic model relies heavily on imported technology with little regard for local research and development¹⁰. Also, we do not agree that 'geographical isolation' is a major factor in slowing down the development of basic sciences in Chile. If this were the case, how would the authors explain the explosive development of science, culture and higher education in Chile and Argentina during the 1950s and 1960s?

To conclude, we believe that democracy, respect for human rights and intellectual freedom are the relevant factors for the advancement of science. As evidenced by recent reports of Chilean and international organizations¹¹⁻¹⁴, these factors are sorely lacking in Chile today.

JONATHAN KING and ANNAMARIA TORRIANI

Department of Biology MIT, 77, Massachusetts Ave., Cambridge, U.S.A.
On behalf of eight Chilean biomedical scientists working in North American universities.

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