

¡No pasarán!

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Personal reminiscences of my interactions with Héctor Rubinstein in the running of JHEP are briefly reviewed.

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1. First meeting: This physicist really knows in which field I am working!

Héctor and I met for the first time at a Sakharov meeting in Moscow. Although we were not carrying research in the same area, I was struck not only by his very warm accolade, as if we had always known each other, but also by the fact that he was so much aware of my scientific work and the fields it covered, almost more than myself! I understood later why: he was already dealing with scientific publishing. As an editor he was following with a close eye the developments occurring in a broad spectrum of physics areas. Not only did he know the current scientific trends but also he knew who was doing what – with a strong opinion on the research subjects worth being carried out. This is a priceless expertise for running a journal and matching, in particular, the most appropriate referees to submitted manuscripts. I did not know then that I would appreciate so much his expertise later.

He had also an excellent knowledge of the monopolistic practices of some commercial publishers and their techniques for pumping research resources from libraries, selling for instance “junk journals” (to use his words) through packages combining the better and the worst, which had to be bought as a whole. These practices scandalized him (and rightly so) and led him to play a remarkable role in scientific publishing “run by scientists for scientists”, the flag carried by JHEP, which he put in a strong leading position during his invaluable directorship.

2. Beginning of our collaboration

It is really in 2006 that I began to know him more, when he invited me to succeed him as scientific director of JHEP. I was quite reluctant to accept this challenge but Héctor’s convincing power (other phone calls and emails) overcame my hesitations and I accepted. Who could resist him? Although the arguments he gave to convince me were wrong (“it does not take much time” etc), I never regretted my decision.

Until his death, Héctor was scientific advisor of JHEP. We had therefore many JHEP-related interactions through discussions and meetings, in which he taught me a lot not only about the running of a journal with elitist values (aiming at excellence and relevance) but also about human behaviour and how to handle it (there is a lot of self-pride involved in paper submission).

3. Running JHEP with Héctor

3.1 Regular phone calls and meetings

Héctor had the reputation of being conflictual and many people told me “as an advisor, he must have behaved like a mother-in-law. How could you survive?” This surprises me because we never had any conflict and I never felt any pressure. Maybe because we had the same views on all matters of principle.

We would talk regularly on issues such as the general policies of the journal, choices of new editors, new topics and dead wood, update of keywords, financial situation, but also expansion of Sissa Medialab journals to cover new areas. These discussions were supplemented by periodic meetings with all the scientific directors.

We had of course some disagreements on punctual points, quickly resolved. One, reported here because it illustrates well Héctor's personality, was whether we should do something with the editors collaborating with the "enemy". Héctor was upset at some point that a few JHEP editors were also editors for a journal that I will not name, run by a commercial publisher and sold at an astronomical price. He wanted to exclude them from the board unless they resigned from the other duties. But after a brief discussion, we quickly agreed that we were not in a crusade and that if these editors were doing correctly their job with us - which they did - we should not care about their other activities. No sanction was taken.

Another punctual disagreement was the proposal that Sissa journals should pay referees, a proposal pushed by Slava Mukhanov and me. We quickly overcome his initial opposition as the payment of referees was in line with the philosophy of "journals run by scientists for scientists". He was able to listen. The proposal was endorsed by him and passed. In many instances, it is me who followed his point of view.

3.2 ¡No pasarán!

One of his obsessions was that not a single mediocre paper should be accepted by JHEP. ¡No pasarán! He was therefore watching every morning the submissions and before I even woke up, my mailbox would be receiving messages such as "Watch out, this paper should not pass!", "This author is pretentious and thin air, his new paper only deserves outright rejection", "Do not lose your time with this paper!" How many "Do not be lenient with this submission!" instructions did I receive? Since I was on the same line, these recommendations did not bother me – in fact, they helped –, although I am sure he thought I was too lenient at times... and he was probably right.

Intellectual challenge and relevance, however subjective these might be, were his main criteria for evaluating articles. So "not even wrong papers" were his pet peeves. His judgement proved to be sound in putting JHEP in the position where it is.

Another advice I received from him was not to engage in never-ending discussions with the authors of rejected papers and to avoid making things personal (and to stick to the decision!). These discussions do not converge as they involve self-pride. And one should accept being unpopular. He was promoting the "Not suitable for JHEP" button, which is indeed a very useful invention which avoids frontal attack on self-pride (or at least tries to).

As all of us, he had a great respect for the splendid work done by the dedicated staff of the SISSA journals, "the girls in Trieste" as he used to call them. He was sometimes concerned that they were involving themselves too personally in their correspondence with the authors. I remember a story he told me (was it invented?) that the author of a rejected paper was so upset that he went to the office of the journal which had rejected his work and killed the staff lady who had no responsibility in the decision but had signed the rejection letter.

3.3 Lessons

Héctor was one of the few colleagues I would talk about at home. He had become familiar to my family even though they never met.

He taught through his own example that scientific integrity and scientific elitism (strive for excellence) are values one cannot compromise on; that one should stick to these values without trying to be politically correct. In the long run it pays even if people are upset.

Although he was pessimistic about the future of physics – all current developments were doomed to failure – he had a great admiration for the scientific work of the colleagues he respected. He had the flair to detect talent – and then the ability to trust it. At the same time, vain or petty people would exasperate him. Similarly, he was pessimistic about the world's future but also, somewhat paradoxically, I believe he had faith in humanity.

Very few people are capable of greatness. Héctor was one of them. I miss his regular “¡No pasarán!” or “Do not be lenient!” morning messages.