

The Nobel Diplomacy in Perspective

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Before analyzing the current situation, it seems necessary to recall the historical context in which the Nobel prizes register. The Nobel system has been in existence for over a century. We owe it to the will of the Swedish philanthropist Alfred Nobel who decided to devote his fortune to it¹. A literary man, a polyglot and an amateur poet, Nobel was primarily a chemist at the origin of more than 300 registered patents. This famous inventor of dynamite was also a particularly shrewd industrialist and financier who created one of the first multinationals with, already in his time, subsidiaries in a large number of countries (Germany, United States, France Italy, Norway, Netherlands, Russia, Sweden, etc.). This entrepreneurial dimension allowed him to carry out the pacifist project to which he was attached more than to anything else.

Indeed, paradoxically, his identity is defined more in terms of pacifism. In his will of 27 November 1895, he calls for the creation of five annual prizes²: physics, chemistry, physiology-medicine, literature as well as a peace prize, for which he requires that the awarding be entrusted to the Norwegian Parliament, the *Storting*. This decision sparked a deep disapproval in Sweden. But besides the fact that the Oslo Chamber was then one of the few truly democratic assemblies in Europe, the activity it had already deployed in favour of peace seemed to A. Nobel more determining in his decision than the conflict within the Swedish-Norwegian Union, a very strong conflict in those days. The Swedish industrialist, who was a liberal and a democrat, appointed the *Storting* specifically in charge of that prize considering it was the best qualified and most legitimate institution. And it is today still in charge of this Peace prize.

Thus A. Nobel was inventing a new pacifist technology by investing in a singular and unprecedented device. A system at the crossroad of a doctrine of *peace through law* and of a doctrine of *peace through knowledge*: "*The wishes expressed in the resolutions of peace congresses only do not ensure peace,*" he wrote in 1891 to the Baroness von Suttner³, "*as much*

1. Bergengren Erik, *Alfred Nobel, The Man and his work*, London / New York, T. Nelson, 1962; Kenne Fant, *Alfred Nobel, a Biography*, New York, Arcade, 1993.

2. Particular emphasis should be given to the Nobel prize in Economics founded in 1968 by the Bank of Sweden on the occasion of its 300th anniversary and in memory of Alfred Nobel. Although awarded since 1969 in the same conditions of attribution and reward as the other prizes, it still appears as a singular institution to the extent that it is the only Nobel prize crowning a social science. It even represents the only internationally instrumental reward in this research field. Besides the desire to fill a gap in Nobel's will, it raises this social science to the rank of traditional disciplines distinguished by Alfred Nobel and enhances its prestige at the international level. Colliard Jean-Edouard, Emmeline Travers, *The Nobel Prize in Economics*, Paris, La Découverte, 2009; Dominique Roux, Daniel Soulie, *The Nobel Prize in Economics*, Paris, Economica, 1991.

3. Peace activist and friend of Alfred Nobel, she was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1905.

can be said of great dinners with great speeches. It is not the money that is lacking, but the practical programme, one ought to be able to present the well-intentioned governments with an acceptable project".

The gigantic project which he wished to give substance to, appears decidedly cosmopolitan and pacifist. But as a supporter of world peace, the Swedish philanthropist did not intend to be adamant to just any kind of peace. He dismisses, for example, the idea of peace at any price, that of the defeatists or that of an integral pacifism as advocated by Tolstoy or Gandhi, hostile to any form of violence. In fact, Nobel's positivist ambition proves much broader. It was the ambition of a Cartesian constructor which exalts the faculties of comprehension and aspires to reorganize rationally the global scene from new moral standards. In doing so, he renewed the considerations of moralists such as La Bruyère and Fenelon. But he reached beyond these in order to further the thinking of the philosophers of the eighteenth century by imagining a civilizing device that can change, at the same time, the psychic economy of the direct beneficiaries – the prize-winners – and the state of international relations.

As a naturalist in search of peace experiments, Nobel thus did not share the utopian views of his pacifist friends. Deeply marked by the scientist ideology dominant in his time, influenced by the Pasteur revolution, he sought ways to win the war against the "*germs of the soul*", not only convinced of social interdependence, but even more so of interdependence of States at the international level. He made his thinking clear during the summer of 1892 when, in Bern, at the Congress of universal peace, he declared to participants: "*Do you know how we should deal with this issue? We ought to rally to it influential people who set the tone. We should attribute large amounts of money to prizes in favour of those who have at heart this noble cause and want to see it wins over. These ought to be in such a position that rid of all preoccupations they could devote themselves entirely to their work*".

Now it was clear to him that prizes, regardless of the discipline rewarded, need to dedicate a work accomplished "*in favour of progress and civilization*". Rewarding individuals, these prizes transcend state borders because a disposal of the will stipulates that all prizes established be granted to the most deserving, without taking into account their nationality. This consideration, with its tilt towards meritocratic ideology, is also imbued with a cosmopolitan streak present in all of Nobel's writings and constantly put forth: "*My home is where my work is and I work everywhere*," he used to say.

Today, more than one hundred and ten years after the first prize-awarding, it seems to me that the system is more powerful than ever and remains scrupulously faithful to the spirit of Nobel's will. We are in the presence of what I would call *a Nobel diplomacy*⁴ : a non-State diplomacy whose constituent elements, or lines of force, presents from the beginning, have steadily reinforced themselves since then. Indeed, the Nobel laureates use the legitimacy they have gained in their field of competence in order to claim universality. Close to the "*altruistic citizen*" as defined by Rosenau⁵, these individuals are able to mobilize on the global scene all

4. On this approach, see Josepha Laroche, "The Nobel as a symbolic issue," *RFSP*, 44 (4), August 1994, p. 599-628; Josepha Laroche, *Les Prix Nobel, sociologie d'une élite transnationale*, Montréal, Liber, 2012.

5. James Rosenau, "*Individuals in motion as a source of global turbulence*", in: *The Individual in International Relations*, Paris, Economica, 1994, p. 81-105. The author has also developed this theory of

their capital of knowledge and prestige in order to actuate a reforming representation of political action. While denying the States their diplomatic monopoly, they are often able to intervene decisively in international politics to the point of impeaching States or even sometimes to compete with them. This transnational elite has now the power to speak loud enough to pretend, sometimes, to compete with public authorities. Seeking to assert themselves as a universal force which criticises, monitors and suggests ideas in the face of State actors, they speak up more and more often in the international arena, whether addressing social issues or more directly tackling political or economic questions, especially since they are constantly sought out by the media.

But nothing would have been possible without the process of *nobelisation* which consecrates them and gives them an almost sacred status. It should be clear that the awarding ceremony is a rite of passage – in the meaning of Van Gennep⁶ – which leads to an institutional marking⁷. As a source of honours, the prize assigned to them distinguished them from the common: it transforms them, from mere ordinary individuals, into iconic figures known worldwide. Beyond the recognition of an exemplary trajectory and of an exceptional *curriculum honorum*, the ceremonial ritual converts them into ambassadors of harmony and excellence, while adorning them with a precious glory. Thus, it requires them to embody a very constraining role⁸.

In the five years to come, Nobel diplomacy – as a civilizational diplomacy in the sense of Elias – will take on an even more determining importance. Why? Because it is part of a larger 'logic of structure' which fully corresponds to the current global reconfiguration⁹. It should be understood that the micro-political level is now of crucial importance to understand the complexities of world politics, whatever realistic theorists may say. Therefore, the emphasis on individual dynamics, previously unrecognized or undervalued will, I think, in the years to come acquire even more momentum. And, on all these points, the Nobel, who constitute a transnational elite particularly active and able to aggregate their conducts into a collective form of action, lie at the heart of this problematic. They even have a paradigmatic dimension. In a transnationalist perspective, one should in future explore all possible correlations between micro-political variations of which they proceed and the macro-political effects of these variations: this has become a necessity. It will become possible thus to

the individual as a key variable for the analysis of world politics in James Rosenau, "The Relocation of Authority in a Shrinking World," *Comparative Politics*, 24 (3), April 1992, pp. 253-272 and James Rosenau, "Citizenship in a Changing Global Order", in: James Rosenau, Ernst Otto Czempiel (Eds.), *Governance without Government: Order and Change in World Politics*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1992, p. 272-294.

6. Arnold van Gennep, *Les Rites de passage* [1909], Paris, Editions Picard, 1981 David I. Kertzer, *Ritual Politics and Power*, New Haven-London, Yale University Press, 1988; Victor Turner, *Le Phénomène rituel. Structure et contre structure*, Paris, PUF, 1990.

7. It takes the form of an unchanging ritual that takes place every year on 10 December, the anniversary of the death of Alfred Nobel.

8. Erving Goffman, *The Staging of everyday life*, vol. 1 *The presentation of self*, t. 2 *The public Relations*.

9. Nobel diplomacy, as civilizational diplomacy inscribes itself, conversely to the logic of world brutalization currently under way, cf., Josepha Laroche, *La brutalisation du monde, du retrait des États à la décivilisation*, Montréal, Liber, 2012.

understand for example how changes in individual skills (endowment in symbolic credit) may lead to changes in government policies. More precisely, we must see through case studies, how the autonomy of scholarly knowledge or the international use of fame, lead to the modification of the public authority on the world stage.

Since 1901, the Nobel Prizes have managed to build and embody an international title of nobility which, in terms of symbolic authority, is an unparalleled model. This transnational clergy now has the power to speak loud enough to pretend sometimes to compete with the public authorities and to govern, through its *aura*, individual conducts. The prestige attached to the Nobel Prizes has been unceasingly expanding to the point where the winners have become, over the years, synonyms of global excellence and of spiritual exemplarity as citizens. Perceived as eminent personalities, they constitute a transnational elite with recognized exceptional properties, as much social as moral and intellectual. Accepting gladly invitations from the media, they are drawn to talk, predict and prescribe in many areas yet often far from their field of competence. From the organization of daily life to the future of the planet, from individual rights to the rights of peoples, they speak imperturbably through an expected form of discourse, half-normative and half-prophetic, whose essential feature is to be deemed more legitimate than that of the common man. Recognized as repositories of knowledge and as the representatives of universal values, they have become over the years the official spokesmen of 'noble' causes. Thus they sometimes find themselves directly involved in the quarrels of the century, they work for the emergence of new values or the definition and imposition of new standards. Whether legitimating aesthetic criteria, enhancing priority scientific fields, facilitating or committing the international settlement of a conflict, one notices a constant aptitude to produce 'schemes of perception', reference values that serve to anchor a form of universal consciousness.

Everything indicates today that this rewarding and even exhilarating status, as committed elite is not likely to change, or even fade, quite the contrary. In the future, the Nobel shall continue to be standard-definers and practice-prescribers, thus weighing a non-negligible influence on the evolution of the world stage. Let us not forget that, indeed, our contemporary societies also live on dreams of grandeur, and with the Nobel Prize, they have found their symbols of collective pride.