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Editorial

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Editorial

Serge Haroche

- 1 Our institution is comprised of concentric circles. The outer circle is its audience. It is for them, for all those seeking to cultivate their minds outside the traditional University framework, that the institution was founded nearly five centuries ago. Today this audience is welcomed at the heart of the Latin Quarter, in an entirely renovated architectural space elegantly combining tradition and modernity. Here, specialists learn the latest developments in their field. Lay persons, even when they perhaps do not understand all the intricacies of what they are taught, bathe in the atmosphere of the place, witness the ways in which research is progressing, and share the exciting feeling of participating in the on-going advancement of knowledge. Others, in even larger numbers, who work during the day or live far from Paris, cannot attend the lectures on site but can join in this adventure via the Collège de France website, where most of the teaching is published.
- 2 As a professor and Administrator, I have sensed this audience's enthusiasm. I have been in direct contact with those who have attended my lectures and those who have filled the lecture halls for Inaugural Lectures, Autumn Symposia, and other seminars. When delivering lectures away from Paris, I have also found that the attachment to the values defended and disseminated by the Collège de France are present throughout the world. In all the audiences that I have met, curiosity for science, passion for culture, and thirst for understanding the world and sharing the research undertaking are really the underlying justification for our institution's *raison d'être*.
- 3 The Collège de France's second circle consists of its administrative and technical staff. These are the people who keep the Institution alive, day-to-day and over time. They see to welcoming audiences and to the logistics of the events that punctuate life at the Collège. Additionally – unknown to the public – they ensure the functioning of the Chairs, the research teams, the libraries and the website. They also manage the institution's finances and its buildings. Finally, they deal with the Collège de France's administrative relations with the State, and its ties with the universities and major research institutions with which we are partnered. Over the last three years, I have witnessed this staff's profound attachment to the Collège, and its adhesion to the

institution's spirit and values. Its interest in the life of the Chairs and its presence at the many Inaugural Lectures and seminars play a key part in maintaining the institution's cohesion. Beyond the succession of Chairs, due to professors' retirement or arrival, the permanent staff contributes to perpetuating the Collège de France's spirit. It does not participate directly in its scientific life, yet it transmits its values. Without this cohesion and memory, I would not have been able to manage our institution nor represent it convincingly.

- 4 The Collège de France's third circle is its researchers and academics who work in the Chairs' teams and in those of their partners. PhD students, post-doctoral fellows and senior researchers carry out in the laboratories and the libraries much of the research that professors teach in their lectures. This gives us some idea of the crucial role that they play in the Collège's life and that enables it to fulfil its mission of disseminating science and culture. Research is largely a matter of knowledge transmission and dialogue between generations. The Collège de France professors, appointed once they have reached a high degree of renown and recognition, have to select younger colleagues to work with them, whom they train. For a long time, due to a lack of space or adequate laboratories, the majority of these teams were based in other institutions. With the completion of extensive renovations of our buildings, an increasing number of these researchers are now housed on our premises, Place Marcelin-Berthelot, Rue d'Ulm and Rue du Cardinal-Lemoine. The renovations currently in preparation on the latter site will harmoniously complete this concentration of research teams in the institution's own buildings. Having researchers from diverse disciplines in the sciences and humanities working together like this on the same sites is a great asset for our institution.
- 5 This brings me to the last circle, that of the professors. They are the core of the Collège de France, founded in the sixteenth century around a few *Lecteurs Royaux* (Royal Lecturers) who were tasked with teaching everyone subjects that were not recognized or that were neglected by the university. Tradition, as well as the statutes and rules that have perpetuated it, give the professors the collegial power to co-opt one another and to manage the institution. All decisions are made by the Faculty, which meets three times a year. This tradition, whereby a concentration of powers based on academic criteria alone was instituted, is exceptional in the academic world in France and even worldwide. It has enabled the Collège to survive throughout the centuries and political regimes while maintaining its high level of excellence. Like all human organizations, this system is fragile and its success depends on a subtle alchemy. The choice of themes for the creation of Chairs, along with the quality of the professors recruited, are essential to ensure the institution's excellence. The body of professors, which is limited to about fifty individuals, has to be sufficiently diverse for a wide spectrum of disciplines to be represented, so as to encompass all developments in science and culture. There also has to be an atmosphere of trust among the professors of the various disciplines, so that specialists in one field can convince their colleagues in the other fields of the quality of the candidates they propose. Finally, the professors have to remain in close contact with the academic community outside the Collège, both in France and abroad. They have to draw on their colleagues' advice and to ask for and take into account their opinions, before creating a Chair or electing a new colleague. To grasp the crucial importance of these decisions, requiring much reflection and consultation, one must realize that the Collège de France creates on average five Chairs per year, which corresponds to a renewal rate of ten per cent of its professors. During

my years at the Collège de France, these discussions have afforded me the privilege of rubbing shoulders with colleagues with exceptional personalities. Friendships have formed between us, depending on our affinities, our intellectual interests, and the convergence – sometimes even the divergence – of our ideas and worldviews.

- 6 I will conclude this reflection with some thoughts on the Collège de France's projects and the challenges it has to meet in the coming years. With our renovated laboratories and the Institute of Civilizations, our ambition is to give new impetus to research and the dissemination of knowledge in these culturally and historically rich buildings in the heart of Paris. We are thus perpetuating the Collège de France's tradition, by adapting it to the changing conditions of our national and international environment. While maintaining our academic independence, we foster strong ties with the universities and institutional groupings that form the new academic fabric of this country, especially the Fondation Paris Sciences et Lettres (PSL). To keep up our rank in competition with the most prestigious institutions abroad, we encourage our researchers to seek more European and international funding for their projects. We also foster exchanges between professors and visitors with many universities and research centres around the world. As we are concerned about the geopolitical and climatic challenges facing our planet, we put the competencies of our professors in the exact sciences and the social sciences and humanities at the service of the reflection needed to understand the problems involved and to strive to solve them.
- 7 All these activities require more means, at a time when state funding has been capped and in some cases cut. The Collège de France is not the only institution devoted to research and culture to suffer from the current economic context. In France, in the rest of Europe and throughout the world, the prevalence of the law of the market tends inexorably to reduce all investments that are not immediately profitable. Activities that are essential for human fulfilment, those that seek to satisfy scientific curiosity or its aesthetic aspirations, are receiving less and less public funding as such, and have to justify their potential utility. This demand conflicts with the very nature of fundamental research, the results of which are by nature not programmable, and which lead to applications only many years after initial discoveries. In this context, the Collège de France has no choice but to diversify its sources of funding and increasingly to appeal to those in civil society – from modest donors to large patrons – who share its values and have the means to contribute to the promotion of scientific and cultural research. The Fondation du Collège de France, created in 2008 to centralize and organize donations, recently launched a major campaign to seek funding by raising public awareness of our institution's growing needs. I hope that this campaign will be fruitful and will help the Collège to develop its ambitious projects in the coming years, after crossing the difficult period of economic crisis that we are currently experiencing.
- 8 Finally, my hope is that, beyond the current contingencies compelling it to apply a strict budgetary logic dictated by the law of the market, The French State will fully resume its sovereign function as the defender and advocate of science and culture, with a long-term vision. This will require substantial increases in the public funding allocated to them, based on multiannual planning and without interruptions. It is important for the Collège de France, and essential for the future of French research as a whole, as it will guarantee its attractiveness to young scientists as well as its reputation worldwide.

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