

Introduction

*Michael Sohlman**



The celebration of the Centennial of the Nobel Prizes in 2001 brings with it i.a. a perspective on the development of human civilization over the past hundred years. The disciplines covered by the Nobel Prizes — Physics, Chemistry, Physiology or Medicine, Literature and Peace, as well as the Bank of Sweden Prize in Economic Sciences in Memory of Alfred Nobel (from 1969) — deal with many, if not all, major aspects of the conditions of life on earth. And even if the Prizes have obviously not been able to capture all the most important contributions to the progress of Mankind, they constitute important markers of the major trends in their respective area. The articles included in this volume have the ambition to convey these major trends and developments.

When gauging the meaning and development of the Nobel Prizes, a natural starting point is to ask what Nobel himself intended with the Prizes. His intentions and the criteria he envisaged for the five disciplines are given in his last will, but they remain very broad, and as is clear from the following articles, have necessitated interpretation over the years, an interpretation which remains constantly on the agenda of the Prize-Awarding Institutions.

It is also clear that some of his intentions — that the award would go to “those who, during the preceding year, shall have conferred the greatest benefit to mankind” were impossible to fulfil already from the start: what economists call information-, recognition- and decision-lags were and are still too long.

*Executive Director of the Nobel Foundation.

We also have reason to think that Nobel — at least in the scientific disciplines — had in mind that young, talented inventors should be given a safe financial basis for their work and thereby be spared the constant trouble in finding financiers at the start of their career, as was the case for Alfred Nobel himself. Here the history shows that the Prizes have rather concentrated on the importance of the discoveries, inventions, literary works and pacifist ventures, than on encouragement of young talents. And in our days governments are financing research grants and scholarships, and a rapidly expanding venture capital market provides young start-up entrepreneurs with the needed capital.

Looking back with the perspective of a century, the question arises: What explains the present-day position of the Nobel Prizes? One answer is that the Nobel Prize when it was founded in Alfred Nobel's will, was the first truly international Prize. A number of important Prizes had been awarded in different countries on a national basis long before the Nobel Prizes. But there was no Prize with the same global and internationalist scope and mission. The Will says explicitly that "no consideration whatever shall be given to the nationality of the candidates." This was an important humanistic signal at a time when nationalism and chauvinism was on the rise. Indeed, the system of values underlying the provisions of the last will of Alfred Nobel mirrors his philosophical outlook with its combination of the ideals of the Enlightenment and strong optimism about the rapid progress of mankind. From the correspondence between Alfred Nobel and Bertha von Suttner, it is moving to learn that they thought that the eradication of war, as a kind of human behavior, would be a matter of 20–30 years, i.e. approximately around 1914.

The main reason for the standing of the Prize today is, however, the importance of the names on the list of Laureates and their contributions to human development. And it has been the difficult task of the Prize-Awarding Institutions over the years, to interpret the last will of Alfred Nobel in the light of a constantly changing world. In this work they are assisted in a decisive way by colleagues and experts from all over the world, who participate in the award process, either as nominators and/or as contributors to the evaluation of the different candidates. This wide network of contacts gives the Prizes the character of recognition by peers in the respective field.

On the threshold of the next century of Nobel Prizes, the Prize-Awarders face the daunting task to combine the criteria and formal limits of Nobel's last will with the ever-changing reality of science, literature, and striving for peace.

As a sign of our times, this volume consists of overview articles first written for the official web site of the Nobel Foundation — www.nobel.se. By being printed in this volume the unstoppable progress of Mankind from ‘Gutenberg to Gates’ has been temporarily halted for the benefit of readers who still enjoy holding a book in their hands.