

Des équations aux dérivées partielles au calcul scientifique

Congrès en l'honneur de Luc Tartar

à l'occasion de son sixantième anniversaire

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Closing address by Luc Tartar

Thanks to all

I want to thank the members of the organizing committee, who had planned this conference for the occasion of my sixtieth birthday (which was in December 2006), Luísa MASCARENHAS, Liliane RUPRECHT, Gilles FRANCFORT, Kamel HAMDACHE, François JOUVE, Pierre-Louis LIONS, François MURAT, Roy NICOLAIDES.

I want to thank François MURAT, Liliane RUPRECHT and François JOUVE for the innumerable hours that they have spent in the practical organization, but I want also to thank all the other persons who have kindly given some of their time for helping in practical matters.

I want to thank all those who came to listen to some of the talks, sometimes coming from far away places. I enjoyed seeing many of my friends, but I also appreciated to see many young people whom I did not know.

The organizing committee had come up with a remarkable list of speakers, many of them I had been connected with along the years, in various ways, and I was extremely happy that the talks covered a variety of subjects.

When I was a student in Paris, in the late 1960s, there were not as many different seminars as there is now. Every Friday I attended the Lions–Schwartz seminar, and very often I felt a little frustrated after a talk where I had not understood much. I was very shy, but once I dared to ask what I should read to my advisor, Jacques-Louis LIONS, who was talking with Laurent SCHWARTZ after the seminar; it was SCHWARTZ who had answered my question, but LIONS told me a few minutes after what he had not wanted to say openly in front of his own former advisor, that I should not bother about that subject. I guessed that it was important to be exposed to various questions, but that it was not crucial to understand everything, and that exposition to various topics was a good way to have an idea about what research topics others were interested in. I did not perceive immediately how special it was to be a student in Paris, but later LIONS had explained it simply by saying that, apart from Moscow, there was no other place like Paris, with such a concentration of good mathematicians.

I was touched by the nice words that were said about me, even though I felt that they were exaggerated, and it reminded me of two verses from a poem

If you can meet with triumph and disaster

And treat those two impostors just the same

which I had a lot of trouble understanding many years ago. What had Rudyard KIPLING meant to say?

I had met with disaster after having opposed a method of falsification, and finding no one to help me, I had ended up with a nervous breakdown. How silly of me, son of an immigrant educated in a religious minority, to have expected any help! Although I had stopped believing in “God” when I was a teenager, I could not change the way my mind had been trained, which forces me now to explain what is so silly in some of the laws that physicists believe in.

Why should I be praised? Once I had received a brain that is well adapted to critical thinking, be it mathematics or any other question, was there any other way that I could have behaved than to put this gift to the service of all?

I am grateful to Louis NIRENBERG and Peter LAX to have come from New York. In different ways, they have been an inspiration to me.

I want to thank all the speakers at the conference, for their interesting contributions, and I realize that it was not easy for some of them to have inserted a trip to Paris in the middle of their busy schedule.

I am sorry that one of the invited speaker, Mike CRANDALL, was prevented to come because of a painful health condition. Olivier PIRONNEAU has mentioned my philosopher side, and he has helped me himself for my understanding of a few questions, but it was Mike CRANDALL who had awakened that philosopher side in me, during my stay in Madison, Wisconsin, during the academic year 1974–1975.

Robert DAUTRAY has helped me at a critical time of my career, and his advice has been crucial for improving my understanding of physics, and I am sorry that he could only come for a very short time.

I am sorry that Enrico MAGENES could not come at all.

It was a particular pleasure for me that the conference took place in the former École Polytechnique, where I had studied in 1965–1967.

The amphitheater where the talks took place is named after Henri POINCARÉ, who had been a student at École Polytechnique, and had become later a professor teaching there, but he had taught astronomy (the names of the professors of astronomy were listed on the wall of another amphitheater, named after ARAGO, where I had followed lectures in physics).

I had lectures by Laurent SCHWARTZ in the Poincaré amphitheater, and among the names of former professors that were written on the wall one found HADAMARD, but Laurent SCHWARTZ had not told us that HADAMARD was his great uncle, and one found Paul LÉVY, but Laurent SCHWARTZ had not told us that Paul LÉVY was his father in law. However, Laurent SCHWARTZ had told us that Paul LÉVY was the last good mathematician to have come out of École Polytechnique!

In my promotion of 300 French students, there were only two sons of farmers, and one son of a plumber, and all the others had a father being an engineer, a medical doctor, a lawyer, or a teacher, and my father was indeed teaching Arabic at the time, in Blida or Algiers. Since that time I doubt that people have thought of advertising studying engineering or science among daughters and sons of farmers, and I hope that no one had the silly idea that there should be places in schools reserved for daughters or sons of farmers.

In our curious times, where studying is hardly considered important enough, I wonder how the sentence “Learn everything, and you will see afterward that nothing is useless” would be understood. It was the motto of Hugo, a theologian from the monastery of Saint Victor, which had stood many centuries before, about a kilometer from where the former École Polytechnique would be built.

*Tiger got to hunt,
Bird got to fly;
Man got to sit and wonder, “Why, why, why?”
Tiger got to sleep,
Bird got to land;
Man got to tell himself he understand.*

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