

OTHER THINGS THAT SCIENTISTS DO

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I attended an unusual Chalmers seminar a few weeks ago, the topic was not science but a recent revolution. My Egyptian colleagues, visibly proud and excited, gave two seemingly contradictory wishes for the future: to fight the enormous poverty and to substantially increase the state financed research budget.

However, I do not think this is contradictory at all, and to argue this point, I will tell you a story from our country not very long ago (especially if you consider an Egyptian timeframe).

In 1778 the King would rather have been in Paris than in his capital, the court spoke mostly French and the great scientist Linnaeus had just died. His legacy to science was immense, but fear for the safety of the substantial scientific collection he left led a number of English scientists to form a society, buy the material, and transport it to London for safekeeping where it still remains to this day.

Although Linnaeus had successful students, his son succeeded him on doubtful academic merits. However, his heritage was not completely wasted, his international contacts, his administrative work as the president of Uppsala University and for the Royal Academy of Sciences had lasting effects.

This may have paved the way for the next Swedish scientific superstar, Jöns Jacob Berzelius, arguably the most important chemist of the early 19th century. By this time, Europe had been changed into something much more like what it is today. Napoleon had liberated most of the continent from medieval laws, the industrial revolution was around the corner and the first engineers graduated from the École Polytechnique in Paris.

We remember Berzelius as the father of chemical nomenclature. However, we

should also recall all those other things he did, like transforming the dormant Royal Academy of Sciences to a vibrant scientific institution, ridding it of nominations based on class and connections. Why? Because it shows that a university professor can contribute to society in more than one way.

Berzelius could easily have accepted flattering offers from continental Europe, and left his makeshift laboratory in the kitchen of his flat in the corner of Nybrogatan and Riddargatan in Stockholm for more adequate facilities abroad. What would then have happened to the Royal Academy of Sciences? Perhaps Alfred Nobel, a long time resident of Paris, would have bestowed the honour of selecting laureates on the Institut de France? The consultancy jobs Berzelius made for Swedish industry, would they have been left undone or executed by foreign experts parachuted in at great expense? The latter, perhaps at a low value, as their personal interest in the future of the projects would have been small?

As his fame increased, he moved into the highest social circles. Could anyone else have replaced his influence at court and with the government? Would Carl Palmstedt have been recruited as the first president of Chalmers?

We do not know, but we can say with certainty that even though your fame may be greater in London, Paris or Berlin, the sum of your life may be greater closer to home.



This is why it makes sense to increase the academic research budget to fight poverty. Young and talented people need to see that they have a future and challenging projects within their areas of expertise at home. Even though their research may not be immediately applicable, the secondary effects of voluntary work in learned societies or in promoting science to the public and in schools will have a direct impact. Moreover, as advisers to entrepreneurs, they may play an important part role in the economic development.

I suggest we make a fundamental mistake if we remember the great scientist only for their breakthrough discoveries. We should also see Berzelius as the creator of the carbonated soft drink and investor in Gripsholms kemiskt-tekniska Fabriker. At the same time, present day scientists and engineers should not forget that they too have obligations to society.

Notes:
- The Linnaean Society of London is located at Burlington House, close to Piccadilly.
- The Swedish Research Council and the Swedish International Development Agency have financed cooperative projects under the Swedish Research Links program and the author gratefully acknowledges two such grants with Egypt and South Africa.