

Academic oppression in Chile

SIR—On the afternoon of 1 July, we witnessed the siege and assault of the building of the School of Medicine of the University of Chile by a combined force of the military and the police. Military vehicles and troops first circled the quadrangle where the School of Medicine and its teaching hospital are located and then occupied both buildings. Among other actions, we saw a group of soldiers, armed with automatic weapons and with their faces painted black in combat camouflage, as they took twenty students as prisoners and made them lie face down on the floor of the hall of the School of Public Health.

Afterwards, another seventy students tried to take refuge in the classrooms of the department of physiology. The police broke in, took them out, and lined them up in the hall in order to arrest them. At that point, a professor implored the many faculty members gathered there to do something to prevent the students from being taken away. Her brave attitude created a vividly emotional atmosphere that allowed the dean of the faculty to persuade the police not to proceed to further arrests.

This episode was only one of the many assaults in the past weeks by combined military and police forces in several faculties of our university that have ended with violent arrests of students. These assaults typically include tear-gas bombing, the breaking into the university yards of heavily armed soldiers and vehicles and, in some cases, the destruction of installations and laboratory equipment. As a matter of fact, the action on 1 July was taken because the students were peacefully protesting against the arrest of 118 of their fellows, including the president and other members of the student council, which had occurred the day before inside the university main building. The student leaders were arrested invoking an article of the new Chilean constitution that allows special action to be taken against "terrorists that cause public alarm".

Student demonstrations have been aimed at ending the overt government intervention suffered by our universities since the 1973 military takeover; at the same time, the professors of the University of Chile have recently asked, through a referendum, for the resignation of the present principal of the university, a serving major general of the Army, and the election by the academic community of academic authorities.

On 2 July, Carmen Gloria Quintana, an 18-year-old student of the University of Santiago, and Rodrigo Rojas, a 20-year-old Chilean who had recently arrived from the United States where he was a resident, and who was collaborating as a computer programmer at the department

of physiology of the University of Chile School of Medicine, were found with burns that extended over 60 per cent of their body surface. This event has been well documented by the world press.

On 10 July, the government arrested some prominent leaders of social institutions, who had concurred in the creation of an Assembly of Civilians, asking for the return of the country to a democratic regime. Among those arrested were Dr Juan Luis Gonzalez and Dr Francisco Rivas, president and secretary of the Chilean College of Physicians, and Professor Patricio Basso, president of the Association of Professors of the University of Chile.

We think that these events should stimulate reflection and action by the international academic community. In experimental sciences, insights of widespread relevance are obtained not from the observation of phenomena in their usual context but rather from taking them to extreme conditions. In Chile, the relationship between university, society and the political regime has been brought today to a grotesque extreme.

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AGS vindicated

SIR—In recent months it has been widely reported that scientists at Advanced Genetic Sciences, Inc. (AGS) "knowingly falsified" data in an application to the US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). EPA has now "concluded that there is no information to indicate that (AGS) knowingly falsified its application".

The original allegations of data falsification surfaced during a congressional subcommittee hearing, and were based upon an unsigned two-page handout and an 8 × 10 inch photograph. These documents were supposed to demonstrate inadequate experimental design and plant pathogenic effects of the recombinant Pseudomonads, and were purportedly the subject of an AGS cover-up. EPA now accepts this "evidence" was inaccurate.

Unfortunately our vindication from the charge of falsification will not automatically reverse the damage that has been done to the reputations of individual scientists at AGS. The uncritical reporting of these allegations has caused much damage; scientific fraud should not be taken so lightly.

An article in *Nature* (320, 472; 1986)

referred to the allegations as though they were established fact, perhaps because of a misunderstanding of the operating procedure of EPA's Office of Enforcement and Compliance Monitoring. The process of developing an "administrative complaint" is interactive and EPA's initial charges were apparently made more in the spirit of prosecutor than in the role of judge. In fact, the charges of data falsification were not supported by EPA's own data audit, the basis for the final retraction of those charges, which had already been completed when the initial complaint was issued.

How and why did this situation lead to the publication of misleading, unjust and damaging reports? Somewhere between the deed and the reporting, the process of disseminating information went badly awry. It should be of concern to everyone when the news reaching the scientific community becomes subject to distortion by politics and sensationalism. It should be of concern to everyone that our case demonstrates the success of a frightening weapon — the gratuitous accusation of fraud.

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● We are glad to clarify that the allegation of falsified data appeared only the EPA's formal complaint, not in its announcement that AGS would be fined \$20,000 (later reduced). But should not EPA be more careful about giving currency to allegations such as these, especially when it knows them to be unfounded? — Editor, *Nature*. □

Parapsychology

SIR—Elitzur¹ criticizes Marks² for having omitted "representative" works. I know of no work that could be acceptable as a case for parapsychology. As for the extraordinary instrumental sophistication proudly presented, my question is why such a complicated mess is necessary for the basically rather simple claims of *psi* such as telepathy, telekinesis and so on. If they existed, their demonstration should actually be simple.

There is an explanation for the complexity. The more complicated the experiment, the more likely it is that it will have errors that will be attributed to *psi*. At the same time, it becomes easier deliberately to introduce errors and more difficult and time-consuming for sceptics to find them. If anything, the mentioned counter-hypothesis coincidence, artefact, self-deception and fraud become more likely.

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1. Elitzur, A.C. *Nature* 321, 465 (1986).
2. Marks, D.F. *Nature* 320, 119–124 (1986).