

English translation of Ann Hibner Koblitz's talk on the occasion of the 2011 Kovalevskaia Prize ceremony in Cuba

In most countries of the world, young people today are very much influenced by imported films, the Internet, and the culture of consumerism that's centered in the United States. Unfortunately, they often shun scientific careers, preferring instead more lucrative professions such as business.

Now more than ever Cuba must attract young people to the scholarly and scientific professions so that the country can continue to develop its own independent path, finding its own solutions to technical and social problems. But boys and girls will not choose these professions unless they have contact with scientists and scholars who can act as role models and encourage them to become intellectuals.

For this reason in future years it would be a good idea if the winners of the Kovalevskaia Prize could have meetings and informal activities with high school and university students. They can talk with the students about scientific careers and explain the non-material satisfaction that comes from success in the sciences — when discovering a type of bacteria that can be used to clean up an oil spill, for example, or new herbal medicines that are cheaper, have fewer side effects, and are ecologically more sustainable than imported pharmaceuticals.

In the United States, the Association for Women in Mathematics (AWM) sponsors “Kovalevskaia Days” in many high schools. Women mathematicians visit the schools, where they hold a day of mathematical activities with the girls. They give talks about the most famous women mathematicians, discuss the many professions that require advanced training in mathematics, and encourage the girls to think seriously about scientific and technical careers.

These activities, which have been going on for almost 30 years, have produced excellent results. On various occasions I have met young women mathematicians and computer scientists who told me that their decision to study those fields had been inspired by a Kovalevskaia Day in their high school or by some other AWM activity. The Association for Women in Science (AWIS) and the Association for Women in Science and Engineering (WISE) have similar programs.

Yesterday the Vice-Rector of the University of Havana, Dr. Cristina Díaz López, gave me a copy of the magazine “Universidad de La Habana,” which contains a very interesting historical timeline. For example, it mentions that in 1885 Mercedes Riba Pinos was the first woman in the history of Cuba to obtain an advanced university degree. The timeline also shows that on November 16, 1921 there was a student demonstration that prevented the conferring of an honorary doctorate on General Leonard Wood, who was the military governor of the island during the first U.S. occupation.

It is now 90 years since that historic student protest. During the next decade, leading up to the centenary of this event in 2021, the challenge for Cuban students, scientists, and other intellectuals will be different. The danger for Cuba will not be a military invasion or occupation, but rather a cultural occupation and an invasion by alien values that are regressive and unproductive. The youth of Cuba need to reject this invasion and occupation with the same determination and courage with which their ancestors protested against the military occupation in 1921.

I wish to conclude by again congratulating the 2011 winners of the Kovalevskiaia Prize.