



ACADÉMIE
DES SCIENCES
INSTITUT DE FRANCE

Les traductions des **Comptes Rendus**

Biologies

François Gros: an intelligent, kind-hearted man who couldn't say no

Full text translated by Marie-Hélène Buc

Translation posted online: 2024-05-06

<https://doi.org/10.5802/crbio.133-en>

Abstract: Here I recall some privileged moments in my interactions with François: when he helped me obtain a grant for an NGO; when I participated in the work of COPED; when I returned to hospital medicine, his support for writing and publishing books that give patients a voice.

Keywords: Drepanocytose, DRC, Neonatal screening, Subventions, COPED forums

Original article:

Marie-Hélène Buc, "François Gros : un coeur intelligent et bon qui ne savait pas dire non". *Comptes Rendus Biologies*, vol. 346, Special Issue S2 (2023), p. 89-90. <https://doi.org/10.5802/crbio.133>

Les traductions des *Comptes Rendus* sont mises à disposition du public dans un but d'accessibilité mais n'ont pas reçu de validation scientifique avant leur publication, seule la publication initiale engage la responsabilité de l'Académie des sciences. Le projet Traduction des *Comptes Rendus* est soutenu par le ministère de l'Enseignement supérieur et de la Recherche et par la délégation à la langue française et aux langues de France du ministère de la Culture.



This translation is licensed under the
CREATIVE COMMONS ATTRIBUTION 4.0 INTERNATIONAL LICENSE.
<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>



I joined the Institut Pasteur in September 1962 for what was supposed to be a short internship, but I worked there for 33 years.

At the time, I had left medicine and the preparation for the “Internat” fascinated by the lectures given by Jacques Monod at the Faculté des Sciences. He accepted me in his department, despite the fact, as he told me, that I “belonged to medicine and to the female sex”. It was there that I prepared my doctorate in science under the supervision of my husband, Henri Buc. I then joined François Jacob's laboratory, which I left in 1992.

I do not want to recount here the magnificent career of François Gros. He was successively an eminent researcher, attracting many great scientists to him and collaborating with the best international specialists of the time; then director of the Institut Pasteur, professor at the Collège de France, member of the Académie des Sciences, of which he became permanent secretary; and scientific advisor to François Mitterrand.

In fact, I hardly knew him at all during that time.

It was only after my retirement in the early 2000s that I had the great good fortune to interact with him, an interaction that lasted until his death. I would like to mention three moments that were particularly important to me:

(1) My new involvements brought me closer to medicine and Africa. At the time, I was actively involved in a Franco-African medical association that wanted to organize neonatal screening for sickle cell anaemia in the Democratic Republic of Congo. This genetic disease, the most common in the world, is terribly painful and potentially fatal in homozygotes (children affected in Africa rarely live beyond the age of five) and is linked to a mutation in a gene that encodes one of the haemoglobin chains. To carry out this screening, we needed specialized equipment and funding. Stuart Edelstein, a member of the association's scientific advisory board had just published a book, *Biology of a Myth*, about the cultural implications of sickle cell anaemia. At his suggestion, I contacted François Gros in 2004. He, at the time honorary permanent secretary of the Académie des sciences, reviewed with much good will the project I submitted to the Académie. Thanks to him, we received major grants for two consecutive years.

(2) François Gros then generously associated me with COPED (Committee for Developing Countries), which he had created within the Academy in 1996. In order to promote scientific exchanges with the countries of North and sub-Saharan Africa, COPED organizes forums on specific issues (science, health, energy resources, demography, etc.). I took part in two of these, as François had asked me to write the proceedings. This heavy workload enabled me to meet African leaders, academics, scientists and members of Academies, and to become aware of their problems and possible advances in the context of each country. The 2009 forum focused on education, from primary school to university. The 2011 forum was entitled “Water, Health and Agriculture in Africa”. Participants endeavoured to take stock of the water resources available in their own countries. Meanwhile, French and African researchers reported on cutting-edge methodological approaches to sanitation and risk prevention.

My commitment to the work of COPED lasted almost three years. It enabled me to devote myself to more human investments than those offered by pure research. Very gradually, by listening to François and working with him, I really got to know him. I appreciated his selfless love for science and his often exhausting efforts to make forums useful in terms of their spin-offs, often in fields far removed from his initial training.

(3) It was then that I returned to medicine, focusing on its socio-cultural aspects in collaboration with Professor Frédéric Galactéros. Professor Galactéros, a leading specialist in sickle cell anaemia, asked me to interview patients about their experiences, their feelings and their methods of coping with the interferences between their work and their illness. These interviews became the subject of a book entitled *La maladie génétique au quotidien. La drépanocytose, histoires de vies*. Once again, François' collaboration was invaluable: he encouraged us to keep to the spirit of our approach (giving a voice to those who usually do not speak out); he read over my texts and made suggestions to make the book more accessible. He wrote a beautiful preface for this first book (there was a second one) and helped with its publication at the Presses Universitaires de France.

My relationship with François Gros was a lasting one. Quite often, right up to the end, I would push the door to his new office on Quai Conti, at the top of the tower where one stands close to both the Louvre and the sky. I kept him updated on my new projects concerning sickle cell patients. But our conversations were often more

personal. I would tell him about my questions. He would tell me about the many requests for his services that he was trying to meet. We talked about the world around us. . .

François had a very rare and precious gift: the ability to welcome all kinds of people, to listen to them with kindness and to bring out the best in them. With his usual modesty, he used to tell me that he was “just an impresario”. On the contrary, Henri Buc and I are deeply convinced that this intelligent and generous heart, which never said no, was the foundation and driving force behind a humanistic vision of science.

After my conversation with him, I would leave the Institut de France in a serene frame of mind. It had become a tradition for me to cross the Pont des Arts and then walk joyfully through the Cour Carrée du Louvre.

1. Disclosure of interests

The authors do not work, do not advise, do not own shares, do not receive funds from an organization that could benefit from this article, and have not declared any affiliation other than their research organizations.