

## Nobel Prize week

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Last week was the Nobel Prize week. Well, it is not quite correct to name it so because the week of the award ceremonies in Stockholm and Oslo can certainly also be named so, notably the second week of December, when the laureates travel to attend the elegant ceremonies, in the presence of kings, queens and other dignitaries. The winners receive their gold medal, diploma and cheque, and they deliver Nobel lectures. The prize amount is now SEK 8 million (USD 1.1 million) for each prize, which is shared if there is more than one winner (maximum three per prize). The prize money originates from the interest gained on the fortune of Alfred Nobel (1833-1896), the inventor of dynamite and some 355 other patents. The Nobel Foundation administers the money and prizes, which have been awarded since 1901 in accordance with Alfred Nobel's will.

The media and the general public are perhaps less excited about ceremonial events in December than when the announcements are made. Yet, in December, it has also become common for interest organizations to invite participants, including Pakistani friends, to travel to the 'winter events' in the Scandinavian capitals. Hence, participants from Link School System in Lalamusa, Gujrat, have been hosted Lindeberg Skole, a lower secondary school in Oslo.

This year, with Malala Yousafzai being among the distinguished winners, perhaps more Pakistanis will go to Oslo, yes, including the Prime Minister, whom she has said she wishes could come, with his Indian counterpart, since the prize was shared with Kailash Satyarthi from India. Congratulations to the winners and the courses they advocate, education for all girls and boys, action against child labour, and support for an inclusive life for all children, which can contribute in making extremism less attractive. The chairman of the Norwegian Nobel Committee also mentioned that the prize is to winners from two religions, a Muslim from Pakistan and a Hindu from India.

The prizes this year were very thoughtfully chosen, and hardly any would be very controversial. But one could always find other candidates who would be as deserving winners, especially in the fields that we ordinary people can judge, notably peace and literature, and to some degree in medicine and economics. Some would say that the peace prize should be more directly against war and armament. Physics and chemistry become too specialized to consider for a layman like me. However, this year, the prizes were to scientists who have done work that will have direct practical application, which lay and learned can understand.

The first prize that was announced last week was in medicine, which was shared by an American-British man, John O'Keefe (74) and a Norwegian couple, Maj-Britt Moser (51) and Edvard Moser (52), all clinical psychologists, or more specifically, neuroscientists.

Then on Tuesday, it was physics, and that prize went to two Japanese men, Isamu Akasaki (85) and Hiroshi Amano (54), and Shuji Nakamura (60), the latter a US citizen.

On Wednesday, it was the chemistry prize, which went to two American men, Eric Betzig (54), William E. Moerner (61), and a German man, Stefan W. Hell (47).

And then, after so much science, it was literature on Thursday. The prize went to the French writer Patrick Modiano (69).

On Monday this week, it was economics, and that prize went to Jean Tirol (61), a Frenchman working at the university in Toulouse and MIT in Massachusetts, USA.

The prize in economics was established as Nobel Memorial Prize in 1968, at the 300<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Central Bank of Sweden. It is strictly speaking not a Nobel Prize, yet it is administered by the same prestigious Royal Institute of Sciences, which also decides on the prizes in the two natural sciences.

The prize in physiology or medicine is awarded by the Nobel Committee of Karolinska Institutet, in older texts referred to as the Royal Caroline Institute. It is one of the country's oldest universities and it is ranked as one of the topmost universities in the world in several medical fields.

Svenska Akademien, the Royal Swedish Academy, is sometimes referred to as 'De Aderton' because it has 18 members, mostly authors and professors in literature and the humanities. To be included among 'De Aderton', and decide on the literature awards and more, is in Sweden considered almost as prestigious as receiving the prize oneself.

On Friday last week, the two winners of the Nobel Peace Prize, the best known prize, were announced. As mentioned above, it went to Malala Yousafzai (17), Pakistan, and Kailash Satyarthi (60), India. One Pakistani has earlier received the Nobel Prize, Abdus Salam, who in 1979 received the prize in physics, shared with Sheldon Lee Glashow and Steven Weinberg. (Har Gobind Khorana won the medicine prize in 1968, with Warren Nirenberg and Robert W. Holley. He was an American citizen, but born in Pakistan.)

Malala became the youngest ever to win the Nobel Prize, and in addition she is a woman. Of the close to 800 winners since the prize since 1901, just some 5%, or 46 winners have been women, plus 21 organizations. The winners have mostly been older European and American men, with a high number of Americans, Brits, Germans and French – and Jews. This year, the 'American connection' was less than what is often the case, but several of the European and Japanese winners had links to American institutions, indicating that USA has very good and top institutions.

Traditionally, elite institutions are required to excel in the sciences. Yet, that isn't always necessary. The Norwegian winners of this year's Nobel Prize in medicine show that also small institutions can develop excellent research environments. The Moser couple established their institute only about twenty years ago at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology (NTNU) in Trondheim. But they did have good funding, and good partners in the capital, and in London, where the third winner is based. Had the Moser couple stayed in Oslo at a larger institute, they may not have had a similar conducive environment for innovative work.

I would like to underline that more and more winners work in teams, often transnational teams. In literature, though, the prize is usually for individual work. The themes and style of this year's winner of the literature prize is very French and European, even universal, but not American. Patrick Modiano writes about themes and destinies that are almost ungraspable, both historically and currently. This is French, and it is timely, because today we are often very utilitarian and quantitative in our thinking.

The theme for this year's economics prize was timely, too, notably work about control of capitalism, especially the importance of regulating large companies. The recent economic crisis shows how important that is, and leaders of key economic institutions have begun to realize this, including Christine Lagarde, the managing director of the International Monetary Fund (IMF). This is support for the 'Scandinavian model', building societies with a strong private sector along with a strong state, with high taxation and a myriad of regulations to redistribute wealth and create greater equality and inclusiveness of all people.

Although I and we all, probably, are fascinated by the world's most prestigious prizes, I don't like the elitism that the Nobel prizes portray. Yet, not all winners need to say what Malala said, notably that she feels she doesn't deserve the prize. I would still suggest that most winners know that there would be dozens, or hundreds of equally good candidates that were not even nominated, indeed not winning, every year, in every field. We should cultivate the good and the very good, not elitism. And we should always promote teamwork, not just three people who can win the Nobel prizes at a time, but the larger research communities and professional environments – and the families, parents, friends and others who support everyone to make good work possible. Most of us don't win any prizes at all, but we may still do well.

The writer is a senior Norwegian social scientist with experience from university, diplomacy and development aid.