

LETTERS TO PROGRESS IN PHYSICS

Abraham I. Fet (1924–2007). In Memory of the 90th Anniversary

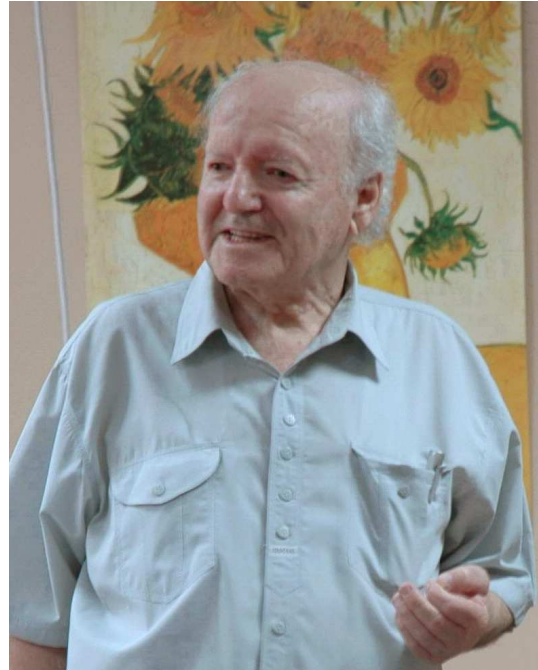
Abraham I. Fet (1924–2007) belonged to a particular “species of human” that is becoming extinct today: he could be rather a man of Renaissance in late Medieval Italy or Enlightenment in France in the 18th century, or a bright representative of intelligentsia in Russia of the 19th century.

A. Fet got his basic university education in mathematics and submitted a brilliant candidate (PhD) thesis at Moscow University being barely 24 years old. The mathematical results of his doctoral (DSc) thesis, presented later at the same University, still remain unsurpassed. He mainly published papers in mathematics, but he was also enrolled to research in physics that he started in collaboration with Yuriy B. Rumer, the famous Russian theoretical physicist. The results of their joint work were published in two co-authored books *Theory of Unitary Symmetry* (1970) and *Group Theory and Quantum Fields* (1977). Then there followed *Symmetry Group of Chemical Elements*, a book written by Fet alone, which presented a new physical perspective of the System of Chemical Elements and has become classics.

His research interests, however, were not limited to mathematics and physics. He remarkably explored many sciences and humanities, among which biology, economics, history, philosophy, sociology, psychology, and even literature, music, and arts. Moreover, being an encyclopedic scientist, he was not just an “erudite”: with his powerful intellect, he built up a solid worldview from seemingly dispersed lines of knowledge.

First and utmost, Abraham Fet was a thinker, and his thinking was a blend of intellect, passion and concern. His major concern was about the fate of Mankind; he felt himself an active and responsible protagonist rather than being an observer “heeding to good and evil with equanimity, knowing neither pity nor ire”.

A. Fet thought a lot on the human society, on the biological and cultural nature of man, on religious beliefs and ideals, and on the social mission of the intelligentsia, which he saw primarily in enlightening. He summarized his ideas in numerous essays and several books: *Pythagoras and the Ape* (1987), *Letters from Russia* (1989–1991), *Delusions of Capitalism, or the Fatal Conceit of Professor Hayek* (1996), and finally *Instinct and Social Behavior* (2005). The latter became his main work, where he investigated the history of culture in terms of ethology, with the aim to “reveal the impact of the social instinct on the human society, to describe the conditions frustrating its manifestations and to explain the effects of various attempts to suppress this invincible instinct”. That



Abraham Ilych Fet

was his discovery and first study of a social instinct unique to humans, which he called “the instinct of intraspecific solidarity”. With comprehensive historic examples, he has convincingly demonstrated how the morals and love for our neighbors originated from tribal solidarity within a minor kindred group and how the mark of kinship spread progressively to ever larger communities, as far as the entire mankind.

Two previously published books, together with a wealth of unpublished manuscripts, are now coming to the public with his *Collected Works* in seven volumes*.

With his excellent command of seven European languages, Abraham Fet not only had an extremely broad range of reading but also chose some important books and translated them for his friends and broad public. It was especially valuable in the conditions of harsh censorship in the Soviet times, when many books, for instance on psychology, were forbidden. Thus he translated Eric Berne, Erich Fromm, Karen Horney, Gregory Bateson, and many others. Being himself fascinated with the works of Konrad Lorenz, Fet was the first to introduce Lorenz’s main books to the Russian readers. Namely,

*The publication is just in Russian; an English volunteer translator is wanted. Ask Ludmila Petrova aifet@academ.org, for detail.

he translated *Das sogenannte Böse* (“The So-Called Evil”), *Die acht Todsünden der zivilisierten Menschheit* (“Civilized Man’s Eight Deadly Sins”), *Die Rückseite des Spiegels* (“Behind the Mirror”), which were then published twice in post-Soviet Russia.

Abraham Fet was an ardent opponent to tyranny. Although being more a thinker than an active public person, he signed the “*Letter of 46*” in spring 1968 in defense of imprisoned dissidents. That lost him his job, both at the research institute and the university, and left him unemployed for years, to survive from occasional earns. Another reason of his dismissal, though, besides the very fact of signing the letter, was rather his spirit of independence and straight speaking. He called things the way he saw them, were they professional or personal characteristics of his fellows, or intrigues of functionaries or the privileges in science. A moral maximalist, Abraham Fet despised those who “lived as the others do” and called this lifestyle “the life of insects”.

Beginning with the mid-1970s, Fet closely followed the events which took place in Poland. He perceived the revolt of

1980–1981 as the start of collapse of the so-called socialist camp. His book *The Polish Revolution* written in the wake of the events was anonymously published in 1985 in Munich and London. He not only provided deep review of the Polish events but also disclosed their historic prerequisites, demonstrated the outstanding role of the Polish intellectuals and foretold the further historic paths of the country.

Making retrospective of Fet’s life and works, we can definitely put his name along with the most outstanding scientists and thinkers of the 20th century. He was among those who rarely get recognition during their lifetime. Rather than being in line with the “spirit of epoch”, his ideas were against the mainstream. However, these are the ideas that are worth the most as they blaze truly trails to the science of the future and appeal to the future Mankind. Let his memory live for ever!

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