

Statement from the FMSH Friends Association

The Foundation Maison des Sciences de l'Homme (FMSH) is currently facing a deep crisis, which threatens the future of this nationally and internationally recognised institution, established by Fernand Braudel in 1963.

Reacting to the campaign launched more than one year ago, and intensified recently by the new majority dominating the Supervisory Board of the Foundation, Professor Michel Wieviorka, the president of the Directoire (the executive branch of FMSH), has announced at the end of the last Board meeting held on July 20th 2020, that he will resign with effect from October 31st. The two vice-presidents of the Directoire, Professor Ghislaine Azémard and Professor Jean-Pierre Dozon, did the same. Following these developments, four qualified members of the Board announced their own resignation, with immediate effect: Jean-Jacques Augier, former chairman of the Supervisory Board; Mrs Béatrice de Durfort, General Delegate of the French Centre for Funds and Foundations; Dr Bertrand Jouve, Senior CNRS Fellow; and Mrs Sandra Lagumina, from the State Council (Conseil d'Etat).

The personalities who have resigned disapprove the willingness of the institutional members of the Board to put the FMSH — a public utility foundation with a private-law status — under tutelage, to deny it any autonomous scientific policy, and to have it serving exclusively the new Campus Condorcet, whose aim is to become the major French pole for Social sciences and Humanities. Let us recall here that the FMSH is already one of the eleven “institutional members” of the Campus. On April 30th, five institutional members of the Council have called for an urgent roadmap for transferring to the Campus Condorcet, “at the earliest”, the FMSH “resources and staff”. The way is open today for reducing the Foundation to simple status of a Services Department— an initiative which seems more interested by its “resources and staff” than by its dedicated academic mandate.

In such new circumstances, the FMSH Friends Association expresses its deepest concern and asks everyone to act with responsibility. In the current crisis, it is decisive that the great academic institutions represented in the FMSH Supervisory Board comfort Social sciences and Humanities without hegemonic views, and respect the principles defined by the Minister for Higher Education, Research and Innovation in her letter dated April 27th. In this document, the Minister called for the reinforcement of the relations between FMSH and the Campus Condorcet — to whom the Foundation has already transferred its patrimonial jewel: its library which will be a major component of the “Great Documentation Equipment” serving the Campus. But she called also, with reference to the FMSH, for a process “respectful of its history and of the considerable work achieved during the recent years”.

With these goals in mind, the recent controversies about the management and the scientific policy of the FMSH should not be used as a pretext for dismembering the Foundation. On the contrary, they may feed a genuine open debate on the role the FMSH can and should play within the French research system, currently undergoing a great transformation. Such a debate is all the more important that the FMSH has been established as a space of intellectual freedom. As its history demonstrates, its basic values have always enabled the Foundation to evolve for serving the large field of Social sciences and Humanities, in France and across the world. This is why, for decades, key institutions such as the National Centre for Scientific Research (CNRS), the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs including its embassies network,

and the Ministry for Higher Education and Research have shown that they were considering the FMSH as a common good of the French academic research community, and as a partner deserving support and reinforcement, not undermining. Indeed, the Campus Condorcet would gain to rely upon a reinforced Foundation able to link with the best institutions and scholars dedicated to Social sciences and Humanities, in France and abroad.

The future of this common good is now in the hands of the Supervisory Board. When co-opting four new qualified members, will the Board be open to a degree of diversity of views? Will it open its ranks to much needed foreign members, who are now absent after the withdrawal, in 2019, of the Belgium's National Fund for Scientific Research, tired of intra-French debates? Will the Board be wise and far-sighted enough to elect a new Directoire which would advance, in a changing institutional context, an ambitious intellectual project echoing what Fernand Braudel and Clemens Heller did in their own time — a legacy that their successors have preserved and cultivated in their own right.

The FMSH Friends Association now relies upon the Supervisory Board wisdom and far-sightedness, but not without concern. For, in a column recently published in the press, several institutional members of the Board, while referring to the “original missions” of the Foundation, appeared to reduce them to “serving the needs of the higher education and public research institutions” —should we understand here the Campus Condorcet in the first place?—, forgetting that the “original missions” of the Foundation were many: to support with agility innovative initiatives presented by French and foreign scholars and to facilitate the publication of their research; to develop international networks; to foster creative capacities and partnerships aiming at promising scientific operations. This is why Fernand Braudel established, with the full support of the ministry officials defining the research policy at that time, a new independent Foundation, aside the great existing institutions.

This is why, true to its mission, the FMSH Friends Association turns to the scientific community, in France and abroad, asking it to voice its opposition to the denaturation, or even to the destruction of an institution which, on the contrary, should be reinforced for the benefit of all Social Sciences and Humanities, in France and abroad. Such an objective would match perfectly with a strong presence of the FMSH on the Campus Condorcet.

For the FMSH Friends Association

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Hinnerk Bruhns', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Hinnerk Bruhns
Chairman of the Association Board.

Paris, July 29th, 2020.