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THE U.S. AND UNESCO AT A CROSSROADS

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INTRODUCTION

The United States is conducting what is officially described as a "fundamental reappraisal" of its policy toward one part of the U.N. system, UNESCO (the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization). It is certainly needed, for the U.S. now stands at a crossroads in its relationship to UNESCO. The direction that Washington will take is sure to have profound impact not only on UNESCO but the U.N. as well.

The decision to "reappraise" the U.S. role in UNESCO was taken after a period of mounting American discontent with the performance of UNESCO and increasing tension between the Director General of the Organization, Amadou-Mahtar M'Bow, and American representatives. The latter culminated in June 1983 at a meeting between M'Bow, the U.S. Ambassador to UNESCO, Jean Gerard, and Gregory Newell, the Assistant Secretary for International Organization Affairs, at the State Department. At that meeting the Director General clearly implied that the United States was racist in its dealings with him and the Third World and asserted that it had "a deep psychological problem" which it needed to attend to urgently.

The fact that the reappraisal is taking place is the good news. Good, because UNESCO's activities and rhetoric are pretty consistently inimical to American interests and values; and good also because the United States does not, as of now, have a coherent and effective political strategy for dealing with the Organization.

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The bad news is that although the reappraisal was decided on as long ago as July, according to the State Department, its results are not expected until January 1984. This is bad in two respects. First, it means that the United States will go to the UNESCO General Conference, which begins on October 24 and runs through November--a conference which will deal with a series of important long-term issues--in a state of suspense and uncertainty concerning its future aims and posture. Second, and more seriously, the delay suggests a rather lukewarm commitment on someone's part. There is no reason for a six month gestation period. The facts are already well known and are not highly technical or complicated. What is needed is a decision on how, in terms of its interests, the U.S. should respond to those facts; and what that requires is some concentrated clear thinking followed by an exercise of will in making some fundamental policy choices. An extended period of time is not going to improve the process or the outcome.

While this "fundamental reappraisal" seems to have escaped attention in the United States itself, moreover, it is well known in UNESCO. This is a fact of considerable political importance, for it means that future American credibility in UNESCO now depends largely on the outcome of the reappraisal. If it turns out to be timid and ineffectual, it powerfully will confirm and reinforce the view already widely held in UNESCO of the United States as a paper tiger--that it may complain and bluster and threaten but that in the last resort it will not do anything significant and has no real option but to accept UNESCO as it is.

Having made known its intention to reappraise its position, the United States must now carry the matter through effectively or end up creating an even worse situation than that which provoked the reappraisal in the first place.

THE WORST CASE MODEL

Though most of UNESCO's characteristics are shared by most other U.N. bodies, there is a crucial difference of degree. UNESCO represents a worst case model of the U.N. system. It demonstrates virtually all the objectionable features of that system in an extreme, even caricatured form.

The most serious of these features is a consistent and malignant anti-Western bias. There are some who would concede the existence of this bias but would belittle it as "rhetoric," "merely symbolic," or "ritualistic." In a century which has given devastating evidence of the importance of rhetoric and symbolism in activating extremist political action, however, this represents an extraordinarily naive and dangerous response.

This anti-Western bias has received most publicity in the field of communication, because of UNESCO's efforts to create a "new world information and communication order." The intended purpose of this order is to end an alleged dominance of the

Western media, which is seen as a threat to the "cultural identity" of Third World countries and the minds of those unflatteringly described as "mere passive receivers." Imbalances are to be corrected by restrictions on the Western media and the promotion of Third World structures. Communicators will be required to be more "responsible," in the sense that they will be expected to shape what they have to say in order to promote objectives approved by UNESCO.

The objects of attack are the "monopolies" of the West. The scheme has little to say about the real monopolies of the state controlled communications systems of Communist and Third World countries. Indeed, here as elsewhere, UNESCO sees the power of repressive states as part of the solution, not as the heart of the problem. Nothing exposes the true nature of the proposed "new order" more clearly than the fact that it poses no major problem for the Soviet Union, a country that controls and manipulates communications more systematically than any other in the world.¹

In the economic field, UNESCO is an enthusiastic supporter of another "order," a New International Economic Order, and a consistent denigrator of the market economy. The enormous achievements of the latter in recent decades are briskly dismissed. The plight of poor countries is accounted for almost entirely in terms of the free market international economic system, with no responsibility attributed to the shortcomings of their own domestic policies. Ignored are the successes of Singapore, Taiwan, Sri Lanka, South Korea or the Ivory Coast--all countries that have made remarkable progress under the existing system, despite the fact that most of them are not well endowed with resources.

In its treatment of human rights UNESCO has two main concerns: First, it is concerned to elevate virtually anything which the Third World considers desirable to the status of a human right. In the documents of UNESCO, vague and undefined concepts like "the right of solidarity," "the right to communicate," "the right to cultural identity" appear out of the blue. The objective is to legitimize Third World claims and objectives; the long term result must be to cheapen and debase the whole notion of human rights.

UNESCO's second aim is to elevate "the rights of peoples" at the expense of traditional, individual rights. Yet the custodians of these "rights of people" will be governments. While traditional human rights usually have represented claims against the state, designed to limit its power over individuals, the "rights of peoples" propagated by UNESCO represent devices for giving additional power to the state. The potential use of such concepts

¹ For a fuller account of the communications issue, see Thomas G. Gulick, "The IPDC: UNESCO vs. the Free Press," Heritage Foundation Backgrounder No. 253, March 10, 1983. See also Backgrounders 221 on UNESCO and Education and 233 on UNESCO and Culture by the same author.

as "the right to solidarity" and "the right to cultural identity" to crush the claim of minorities hardly needs elaboration.

Then there is the program concerned with peace and disarmament. The UNESCO view is that military expenditure is "sheer waste"--except for the expenditure incurred by developing countries "compelled" by circumstances (e.g., "the threats of conquest") to acquire arms. The Organization is firmly on the side of the organized peace movements. Over the next few years it intends "to make certain categories of [university] students, such as future researchers and those training for posts of responsibility, aware of their rightful role in averting threats of war." The Soviet Union, confident that none of its "categories of students" will be exposed to the program, has shown particular enthusiasm for this aspect of UNESCO's work.

Ideological bias is not UNESCO's only problem. It is also an inefficient, wasteful and, as far as the Secretariat is concerned, a demoralized organization.

Its inefficiency can be witnessed most spectacularly at the many conferences it organizes. When these are not technical in nature, they generally are characterized by organizational chaos, contempt for proper procedures and blatant manipulation. The Conference on World Culture in Mexico City in 1983, supposedly a UNESCO showpiece, was classic in this respect: deadlines for the acceptance of resolutions ignored; a failure to distribute translations of key documents; delegates required to vote on what they had not had time to consider in an intelligible language; a refusal to set up regular drafting and negotiating procedures and a consequent last minute reliance on manipulative ad hoc arrangements; the arbitrary variation of time given to speakers (Jack Lang's notorious speech attacking American "cultural imperialism" ran for roughly three times his allotted time; others were gavelled down strictly). The highly experienced and usually reticent head of an Asian delegation walked away from the whole thing, declaring with disgust that it was the worst international conference he had ever attended. Yet it was only marginally worse than many other UNESCO conferences.

This performance is symptomatic of a deeper and wider malaise. Morale in the Secretariat is low. Able people leave or are sidelined, while promotions go to the ideologically sound or the nominees of favored countries (a recent poll of members of the Secretariat confirms this appraisal; only 3 percent of those polled considered that UNESCO recruited high quality people--despite the exceptionally favorable terms of employment--or was making promotions on the basis of professional efficiency). Bureaucracies are never known for their boldness, but the UNESCO Secretariat is exceptionally cowed and timid, to the extent that during Director General M'Bow's frequent absences, it is difficult to make any progress on important issues. Key documents--such as the Medium Term Plan (1984-1989)--appear months late. Beyond this, well placed observers maintain that a close investigation

would reveal significant corruption. (Despite these conditions, dedicated people, to their credit, still manage to do useful work in UNESCO, particularly in those fields least amenable to ideological manipulation.)

UNESCO, moreover, is greedy. An example is the proposed 1984-1985 budget, due to be voted on at the coming General Conference. While most of the specialized agencies of the U.N. have recognized current economic realities and restricted their budget estimates to very small or no growth, M'Bow has insisted, over the objections of the principal donors, that UNESCO's budget be increased by between 4 and 6 percent in real terms. The draft budget actually goes far beyond these limits. Conservative Western estimates calculate that this exceptionally opaque document calls for a real increase of over 10 percent; some (including American experts) put the increase as more than double that.

It is not that the amounts are enormous: the proposed budget for 1984-1985 is about \$430 million. The real point is that UNESCO's attitude toward the budget symbolizes so much that is wrong with the Organization: contempt for the major donors on whose money its activities depend, greed as compared with other comparable agencies, an unrealistic refusal to face the reality of its own unpopularity in the West, and deception in the presentation of its demands.

WHY IS UNESCO SO BAD?

If one believes that the U.N. system in general works in ways which are damaging to American interests, there is no problem involved in explaining why UNESCO is bad. For it shares with the other components of that system those structural and political characteristics which make them unsatisfactory from the West's point of view:

- o the strategy of group solidarity pursued by the numerically dominant but poor Third World countries;
- o the divorce of decision making and funding (in UNESCO, 88 percent of member states, a majority, collectively contribute only one percent of the budget; the United States, with one vote, contributes 25 percent);
- o the fact that the Third World majority is motivated by an ideology generally hostile to the West and indulgent to the Soviet Union and its clients.

What does need to be explained is why UNESCO is so bad even by U.N. standards. Three factors explain this.

1) UNESCO deals with issues which are at the same time ideologically inviting and which in most cases are not directly related to the hard, material interests of the Third World majority. Irresponsible behavior, therefore, does not involve immediate penalties,

and there is not the same incentive for the majority to exercise restraint and self-discipline as there is in some other U.N. specialized agencies. On the contrary, UNESCO is an arena in which they can indulge themselves and work off some of the frustrations they experience in other forums.

2) The Western countries have given the Third World considerable latitude in UNESCO because the West has considered the Organization to be of marginal importance, a talk shop dealing in symbols and rhetoric. Balancing what they consider to be at stake in UNESCO against their wider interests, Western countries have been reluctant to make an issue of its behavior. Over a period of time the Third World majority has come to realize this and has become more and more assertive. Whether one considers Western countries to be wise in taking this complacent and indulgent attitude will depend more than anything on the importance one attaches to the competition of ideas and values in international politics.

3) Most important, UNESCO has become what it is today because of the dominant role of its Director General, Amadou-Mahtar M'Bow. Formally, M'Bow is the principal servant of the member states of UNESCO and sometimes, in the face of criticism, he will draw attention to this and claim that he does no more than carry out the wishes of those states. For anyone at all acquainted with UNESCO, anyone who has sat through one of his seven or eight-hour lectures to the Executive Board, or seen him publicly dress down a Western ambassador or Head of Delegation, or listened to the subservient praise heaped on him by Third World delegates, or seen him flatly refuse to amend texts to take account of major Western concerns, or seen him impose his will on a general conference and manipulate its procedures, this is simply laughable.

With an assured majority behind him; with enormous patronage to dispense in the form of well paying jobs, grants to governments and agencies, travel to conferences in glamorous cities, membership in innumerable study groups; with a large and intimidated Secretariat to carry out his commands, M'Bow is indisputably the boss in UNESCO. It is his will that shapes and dominates its affairs.

His approach to his work is thoroughly partisan. Not for him the role of mediating and finding compromises, of adjusting interests and seeking accommodations. Ideologically, he is openly and militantly a spokesman for the radical wing of the Third World. He sees UNESCO as an instrument to right past wrongs and to redistribute powers and wealth in favor of developing countries. Temperamentally he is confrontationalist and combative, with a strong urge to dominate and considerable intellectual vanity. He does not merely respond to the demands of Third World members but takes the lead in formulating those demands in an assertive and uncompromising form (and this tendency has grown as he has tested the ground and found that he can go a long way without meeting effective resistance). He thus creates

an atmosphere in which conflict is maximized, restraint and moderation are discouraged, and realism is firmly subordinated to what can most kindly be termed aspirational politics.

According to some well placed observers, in recent years he has also drawn closer to the Soviet Union and its satellites, particularly Bulgaria.

M'Bow is also exceptionally ambitious and power seeking. Under him, UNESCO has relentlessly expanded its areas of activities into specialized fields where it has no demonstrable expertise and which are the primary responsibility of others: economic theory, strategic doctrine and disarmament, among others. Within the U.N. system he expands whenever there are ideological issues to be exploited. One of the results is that UNESCO's limited resources are spread hopelessly thin and the quality of its work in its areas of real concern suffer.

As an administrator, M'Bow combines authoritarianism with inefficiency. On the one hand he is concerned to keep a tight hold on the Secretariat and to ensure that it is responsive to his will. Compliant men thrive while enterprise, individual initiative and decentralization are not encouraged (despite the lip service payed to the latter). At the same time, however, the Director General has a great taste for foreign travel (in the grand style) and is away from Paris often and for long periods at a time. As a result, the Secretariat often is partially immobilized for weeks on end.

This combination of characteristics in its dominant figure, more than anything else, accounts for what UNESCO is today.

UNESCO GAMES

Different groups of countries play different games in UNESCO. The one that sets the ground rules for all the others is that played by the Director General and the Third World. It is an aggressive game of maximizing demands on the developed countries, seizing what they view as the moral high ground and insisting on the historical "guilt" of these countries, insisting that no importance should be attached to the size of the country's contribution to UNESCO, and refusing to accept the obligation to be "responsible" or "reasonable" in the sense of adjusting claims to current realities. It is a game played with panache and enthusiasm by radical Third World countries, and a little apologetically and shamefacedly by the moderates in the group, who plead the binding obligation to express solidarity with their colleagues.

All the other games are reactive to this one. The communist countries, by and large, are content to sit back and enjoy the conflict between the Third World and the West, particularly the United States, offering support and encouragement but leaving the running to the developing countries. In return they expect, and

usually get, two things: 1) reciprocal support on matters of particular concern to them, the most important of which are "peace and disarmament"; and 2) the framing of Third World demands and accusations in a way that will minimize embarrassment to them. This implicit deal lies at the heart of UNESCO affairs.

The other game that the Soviet Union plays in UNESCO is, of course, espionage. When the French expelled 49 Soviet agents earlier this year, a quarter of them were UNESCO based: nine from the Soviet delegation and three from the Secretariat. The latter still are drawing salaries.

The game played by the majority of European states and Japan is damage limitation. They long ago gave up any significant positive expectations of UNESCO. At the same time, either because they lack the energy and conviction or because they do not consider the issues and the forum important enough, they are not inclined to make much of a fuss about the way things are going. Whether their attitude is realistic, cynical or resigned, their characteristic gesture is a fatalistic shrug. They try, with varying degrees of success, to modify the more excessive demands of the Third World, but being always on the defensive, always reactive, it is generally a question of how slowly they can make their descent down the slippery slope.

While the inclination of some Western delegates is to behave much more robustly, instructions they receive from their governments forbid such action.

There are exceptions within the Western group. France plays its own Gaullist game of attempting to exploit the advantages to be gained by deliberately distancing itself from other Western states (particularly the U.S.) and nurturing its own "special relationships" with the Third World. While it aggressively insists on a leadership role within the Western group, it does not hesitate to break ranks with the other members of the group when it thinks there is an advantage to be gained. The Scandinavian countries, meanwhile, take the Third World rather more seriously than most of their Western colleagues and make strenuous efforts to address the issues and to make sense of Third World demands. Internal conflict and disunity are thus characteristic parts of the Western game.

And what of the United States? It has no game. It has an admirable Ambassador and a strong delegation. They well understand UNESCO and the problems it presents. But their position is unenviable if not impossible, because the U.S. simply does not know what it wants to do at or with UNESCO. The U.S. is temperamentally and institutionally unsuited to adopt the realistic cynical approach of the Europeans. At the same time, it has so far refused to face what would be involved in taking that "war" seriously as far as UNESCO is concerned.

Consequently the United States, devoid of a consistent position or a coherent strategy, is poised uneasily between piecemeal damage limitation, expressions of indignation and outrage, and disassociation with what is going on. The problems this uncertainty generates are not theoretical or abstract; they are most practical: whether to demand drafting and negotiating groups or to welcome their absence as a means of avoiding being compromised; whether to work for the best possible consensus or to stand apart in principled opposition; how much weight to give to solidarity with allies and friends, and so on. Until more basic questions are addressed, these matters have to be answered in an improvisational, ad hoc way, usually under intense pressure, and the interests, influence and image of the United States suffer accordingly.

WHAT SHOULD BE DONE?

To soldier on under existing conditions would make nonsense of the "fundamental reappraisal" and leave the United States in a very weak position. This thus gives the U.S. two basic options: to make a serious effort to improve things at UNESCO or get out.

Getting out has the virtue and attraction of decisiveness. But if the ideological struggle in UNESCO is considered important, the United States should continue to participate if it is at all possible to get reasonably fair conditions for that participation. And if the the United States is to withdraw, it should have, and should be seen to have, exhausted other alternatives first. On the other hand, it is true that changes are only likely if the United States has made a clear and credible commitment to withdraw if they are not forthcoming.

What these considerations point to is the need to combine the two options rather than to treat them as mutually exclusive alternatives.

The United States should announce formally that it will withdraw from UNESCO in one year unless there are substantial changes in the Organization. A senior spokesman of the Administration should attend the first available forum--this month's General Conference; it is not too late--to explain fully why Washington has come to this decision, the changes it deems necessary, the actions it proposes to take to encourage such changes and what it will do if they are not forthcoming.

He should make it clear that:

- * The United States is not launching a general attack on the U.N. system but is taking specific action against a member of that system whose performance has been particularly and, to the United States, offensively bad.

- * The United States is not demanding perfection of UNESCO, but it does require, as a condition of its continuing membership, that UNESCO at least adhere to the standards of other parts of the U.N. system.
- * During the next year, whatever decisions are taken on the UNESCO budget, the United States will restrict its own contribution to the current level, adjusted for inflation. If this is unacceptable, it will withdraw forthwith.
- * Further, while the United States will continue to fund programs that are of no direct interest to it or even one which seems to it to be of dubious merit, it will have no hesitation over the next year in reducing its contribution by one-quarter of the total cost of all programs which it finds positively subversive of its own values and interest (the U.S. contribution being a quarter of the total budget).

He should also spell out what kinds of changes in the functioning of UNESCO the United States has in mind. These should include, as a minimum:

- o a strict adherence to proper procedures at all times;
- o the acceptance by the Secretariat of UNESCO of standards of impartiality, neutrality and objectivity appropriate to an international bureaucracy, and an ending of the treatment of sensitive issues in Secretariat drafts in a tendentious and biased way;
- o a proper respect for the interests and view of minorities;
- o a recognition that while the principle that he who pays the piper calls the tune need not and should not be adopted, due regard must be paid to the views and circumstances of those who shoulder the burdens of paying for UNESCO programs;
- o a respect for the limits of UNESCO's area of competence and a withdrawal from areas which belong properly to other agencies and institutions.

It should also be stressed to the member states of UNESCO that most of these objectives require, more than anything else, fair, impartial and competent leadership from the Director General of UNESCO; that in the view of the United States this has not been forthcoming in recent years; that the United States has grave doubts as to whether it can be forthcoming from the present Director General; and that it therefore invites members to consider his replacement. In saying this the United States should make it clear that it has no objection to another Director General from a Third World nation.

Finally, the United States should consult with other countries to explain its actions carefully and to invite them to adopt similar policies. This approach should be made at a high level; bureaucrats in charge of foreign policy, believing only too often that maintaining good relations should take precedence over interests, are usually part of the problem, not the solution. The U.S. should make it clear that, while it would value the support of other Western countries and be prepared to discuss the modalities of implementing such a policy, its own decision is not conditional on such support.

Whether the policy outline above would succeed in making UNESCO a less objectionable organization is not certain. If it did not, the United States should withdraw in 1984.