

Fifty is a Good Age for a Journal

Jean d'Ormesson

Normally a journal is the work of enthusiastic young people and more often than not it is a short-lived enterprise. And in my lifetime – and in yours too, I suppose – we have seen many journals live and die that survived for only one or two issues. We are now at the 200th issue of *Diogenes*. Why has it been so successful and lasted so long? Well, first of all, for the key to this success we have to give thanks where thanks are due, to UNESCO. Without UNESCO *Diogenes* could not have come into being. *Diogenes* was created by UNESCO and relies on UNESCO's assistance and trust.

In the aftermath of war UNESCO was supported by some great non-governmental organizations, of which the most famous and important was the International Council of Scientific Unions (ICSU), the celebrated ICSU that had already reigned for very many years over the intellectual scientific world. On that model UNESCO wished to create a meeting-place for intellectuals from the literary, artistic and social world that would be responsible for meeting the need for a critical assessment of the humanities worldwide. And that was how the Conseil International de la Philosophie et des Sciences Humaines came about. Its first president was Jacques Rueff, father of the 'new franc', which now seems in the far-off past.

Then all of a sudden, again at UNESCO's behest, the question of a journal arose, a journal for the humanities worldwide, and various solutions were put forward. I recall there was a very prominent journal called *Erasmus*, and negotiations took place with that journal and with others, but then there came on to the scene an exceptional character, a one-time surrealist turned rationalist, called Roger Caillois.

Paying tribute to *Diogenes* means paying tribute first to UNESCO, then to Roger Caillois. He was a friend of Breton and the surrealists. A celebrated dispute in the Café Cyrano had pitted him against André Breton; it was about the little objects you know as jumping beans. The jumping beans, which contain minute creatures, had been brought back from Mexico for André Breton, and on the table in the Café Cyrano people were watching the little things leaping about. And everyone was marvelling at this mystery when Caillois, who was as much of a surrealist as Breton,

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spoke the fatal words: 'Let's open them and find out what's inside.' And with that, of course, he was at once excluded from surrealist circles and went over to the rationalism that was to be the watchword of *Diogenes*.

Roger Caillois was a grammarian who was attracted to China. He was a mineralogist who studied butterflies and masks, and he was someone it was very hard to label. I think that is why he is rather forgotten today, even though he was a very great writer. But he is neither a novelist, nor a philosopher, nor truly a sociologist: he is something indefinable, which a man I greatly admired, Octavio Paz, summarized marvellously in his tribute to Caillois at UNESCO in 1991. I should like to read you a few lines from that tribute to Caillois, lines that I think will illuminate the whole future of the journal *Diogenes*.

'The range of disciplines and topics he explored is prodigious: myth and novel, sacred and profane, war and play, mimetism and sacrifice, mineralogy and acoustics, French classicism and fantasy, Marxism and dreams . . . but also history and its turning-points, the positive and the negative, the left and the right of the universe. Exploration of diverse civilizations and worlds: the primitives and the Han dynasty Chinese, the fratricidal wars among ants and among the clans of medieval Japan, the archaeology of dreams and the impalpable host of sparks that runs along the seams of a piece of quartz . . . All these constructions, speculations and demonstrations are simply searching for the secret links that connect the phenomena being studied to other distant phenomena that nearly always belong to other spheres . . . In the extreme diversity of subjects Caillois sets out to discover the unity of the world.'

Each word evokes a memory for me and you can see how obvious the connections are between Caillois's project and UNESCO's aspirations: diversity of topics, unity of the world.

Caillois was struck by the contemporary development of analysis at the expense of synthesis and by the extreme subdivision – which in fact is a necessary condition for progress – of research work.

I have just been talking to two great French scholars: Professor Beaulieu, whose work you know, and Professor Pouliquen, who is a symbol of that specialization. He is a great surgeon who specializes entirely in the eye. I said to him: 'You who are an eye specialist', and he replied: 'But I'm not an eye specialist, the eye is a whole world, I'm just a cornea specialist.' He does not deal with the eyeball, or anything to do with the eyelids. If you have a problem with anything other than the cornea, do not go to Pouliquen. But if your cornea is affected, Pouliquen is your man.

Well, in *Diogenes* Caillois wanted to stick together the broken pieces of the vase of academic knowledge. How? By going back to large dogmatic syntheses? Definitely not. The nature of Caillois's strategy, which was to become UNESCO's too, was not linear. Rather it followed the moves on a chessboard. It worked through echoes, rumours, information picked up through chance contacts, lateral moves. That was the watchword for *Diogenes* and for what Caillois himself called 'risky coherences'.

Interdisciplinarity is part of it of course. But Caillois went much further than that, further even than transdisciplinarity. What he hoped for was a mutual enrichment among disciplines. I remember very well my excitement when we got quite admirable papers, often on Kant, Fichte, linguistics, articles that were rejected by

Caillois because they did not represent those cultural lateral moves, those exchanges among disciplines, those encounters between different cultures. What *Diogenes* wanted to do was have a psychoanalyst talking about political economy, to see what a linguist thought about classical archaeology, to know what an Indian's view was of the fall of Rome, what an African thought of Maya civilization. In a single finite world, after so much research carried out by scholars in their separate corners, the time had finally come, with the creation of *Diogenes*, for knowledge at peace with itself in its diversity and harmony.

For twenty-five years I was at Caillois' side. Despite the kind words spoken by Madame Aziza Bennani and all the speakers who have followed, I did not do any more than that. And then, for another quarter of a century, I was the man beside Jacqueline Gallay and Paola Costa, who did all the work, while I have come here and received your applause. For many years I have drawn inspiration from a Chinese philosopher who was at UNESCO, who I think was called Lin Yu-t'ang and whose lesson I have never forgotten: 'Alongside the noble art of getting things done by others there is the no less noble one of letting them get done by themselves.' In the case of *Diogenes* they did not get done by themselves. First of all they were done because of Roger Caillois, then because of Jacqueline Gallay and Paola Costa and it was right that thanks should be extended to them. I echo them with all my heart.

You have talked about *Diogenes'* successes. I should like to say a word about *Diogenes'* crises. You have praised *Diogenes*; perhaps I may offer a three-minute critique.

First the crises. They began with the first issue of *Diogenes*. *Diogenes* was the journal of the human sciences, and what was in that famous first issue? Well, there was a magnificent article by Benveniste, the great Benveniste, who took his inspiration from the work of von Frisch and wrote about the language of bees. I think it was the *Canard Enchaîné* that poked fun at the human science journal that talked about bees. Of course they did not have a very good understanding of *Diogenes'* intentions. I remember the terrifying crises that assumed the proportions of battles between giants. I still tremble at the thought of the debate between Lévi-Strauss and Caillois on the subject of races and cultures.

The criticisms will be familiar. First there was a very difficult issue that we have to face up to honestly. In the beginning *Diogenes* was too narrowly European and too narrowly French. Thank goodness we were assisted by faithful friends, in the Executive Council, which I would like to thank in its enduring form, as well as in the General Conference. We were assisted by (I am extremely reluctant to give names because if I do I will inevitably forget some) . . . but it is impossible not to mention Richard MacKeon, who in fact came up with the name *Diogenes*, not because Diogenes was a cynic but because he looked for man with his lantern. Or Charles Odegaard, or South Americans like Gilberto Freyre or Alfonso Reyes, Africans like Paulin Hountondji, Joseph Ki-Zerbo, Amadou Hampâté Bâ, Indians like Raimon Panikkar, the help given by the great USSR or Chinese Academies of Science. And maybe very gradually we have managed to broaden the content and cultural resonance of *Diogenes*. The ICPHS has clearly assisted *Diogenes* greatly and I would like to mention just two names. There have been many ICPHS Presidents, which is why I cannot mention them all. But there have been relatively few General Secretaries. I

would like to pick out the names of Sir Ronald Syme and Maurice Aymard. *Diogenes* is quite clearly grafted, in the horticultural sense of the word, onto the ICPHS and it is a kind of symbiosis that is impossible to divide; maybe you will allow me to recall the names of some people in the Executive Council who supported *Diogenes* most eloquently from its inception. Perhaps I can mention the names of two men who have passed away. One is Paulo Carneiro, whose wonderful speeches in support of *Diogenes* I remember, and the other is Carlos Chagas. Then – not because I can see him here, his name was on my piece of paper before I saw him – I still recall the assistance we were given by Mr Wagner de Reyna, whom I am delighted to welcome here maybe thirty or forty years after our first meeting.

Just a word or two more. What has been *Diogenes'* role? Well, *Diogenes* has played a significant part in bringing together people who might not appear to be close. Repeatedly we asked Arab scholars to work with Israeli scholars, American academics to work with Soviet or Chinese academics. Perhaps we encountered our greatest problems with Soviet and Chinese scholars. But we won through; and I cherish two letters that the Director General of UNESCO sent me where he roundly criticized me for contributing to publications from East Germany and China, which at the time were not yet UNESCO members. And when they joined UNESCO I remember the Chinese were holding that letter, which gave our relations with China a considerable boost.

The second criticism that can be made of *Diogenes*, and this is a genuine criticism that I have often heard, is that *Diogenes* has constantly been at the leading edge of scholarship, and this is true. I would not dare say that it was UNESCO's scholarly avant-garde, I would not say that, instead I would say it was the commercial wing, promoting a scholarship that was as international as possible and my argument was that, just as we needed to keep up the fight – and we still need to – in order to maintain *Diogenes'* universal character, equally we need to stand up for *Diogenes'* role as the home of disinterested knowledge and research on the outer edges of scholarship.

Perhaps I will end with a quotation from Hegel, since we are celebrating the past as we think of the future: 'The first category of historical consciousness is not memory, it is annunciation, expectation, promise.'

Well, I hope we shall all meet here again in fifty years' time to celebrate the progress achieved by the grand old individual that *Diogenes* will then be, at a hundred years of age.

Ad multos annos.

Jean d'Ormesson
Member of the Académie Française
Translated from the French by Jean Burrell

Note

This is the text of a speech at UNESCO on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of *Diogenes* on 21 January 2003.