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Unesco at 60

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Unesco is doing me a great honour by allowing me to provide a testimony on this 60th anniversary of its founding. I am grateful to you and thank you for this, Mr Director-General, without closing my eyes to the fact that I owe the favour chiefly to the dismal privilege of age since, with the passage of time, the number of those directly or indirectly associated with the work of Unesco in its first 10 to 15 years is dwindling.

It so happens that I was one of them, and on such diverse occasions that I sometimes have difficulty in calling them all to mind. They range from the first Statement on Race to the organization of a seminar on the role of mathematics in the human sciences (in which Jean Piaget, Jacques Lacan and Benoit Mandelbrot, who was to be the inventor of fractals, took part), via several reports, a field survey on the social sciences in Pakistan and present-day Bangladesh, and then the International Social Science Council, of which I was for several years the first Secretary-General.

This trust that Unesco placed in me at the outset is something I owe to two men who helped run the Department of Social Sciences, and to whose memory I wish to pay tribute: Otto Klineberg, with whom I made friends in New York during the war when he was a professor at Columbia University; and the great ethnologist Alfred Métraux, who was like a brother to me and whom the Smithsonian Institution is preparing to honour with an exhibition devoted to his person and his work.

It was Klineberg who designed and launched the international programme of surveys conducted in an ethnological spirit, but concerning villages or small towns of what are termed developed countries, which placed western-type societies and those of indigenous peoples on an equal footing. I was put in charge of the French element that gave rise to the work we mainly owe to the lamented Lucien Bernot (then my pupil and later my colleague in the Collège de France) – *Nouville, un village français*, which became a classic and was recently republished.

Dr Edgar Krebs and Dr Harald Prins, who are managing the exhibition of which I have spoken, will be referring more fully in the course of this symposium to the

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figure of Alfred Métraux and his work within Unesco. I shall therefore merely emphasize his role in combating racism and as the person behind the collection of booklets entitled 'The Race Question in Modern Science'. He gave me one, which Unesco has just republished, that contains my 1971 public lecture on 'Race and Culture', which was my last contribution to the collection.

Today's symposium gives me an opportunity to look into the deep-seated reasons why an ethnologist was able, in fields of apparently high diversity, to feel at one with the missions assigned Unesco by the United Nations. Several of those missions lay outside his competence but he saw one taking shape that was, over the years, to occupy a prime place. Now that mission is the same as that which, since its formation as a self-standing discipline in the late 18th century, ethnology came to regard as essentially its own.

To make this central role clearer, I shall take a brief look back.

Ethnology – or anthropology, as it now tends to be called – takes the human being as its object of study but differs from the other human sciences in that it seeks to apprehend its object in its most varied manifestations. Hence the notion of human condition remains marked for it by a degree of ambiguity. With its general nature, the term seems to reduce differences that ethnology essentially seeks to identify and isolate, not without postulating an implicit criterion – that of the human condition itself – which may alone enable it to circumscribe its object.

All intellectual traditions – including ours – have been up against this difficulty. The peoples ethnologists study are sometimes willing to accord the dignity of a genuinely human condition to their own members alone. This usage is to be found not only among the peoples termed indigenous but also in ancient Greece, ancient China and ancient Japan, where, in a curious parallel, the languages of the peoples described as barbarians were likewise likened to the chirping of birds.

Even ethnology in its infancy had no hesitation in putting the peoples it studied into categories separate from ours and right up against nature, as implied in the etymology of the word 'savage' and, more explicitly, the German term 'Naturvölker'; or placed them outside history when they were called 'primitive' or 'archaic', just another way of denying them an attribute that goes to make up the human condition.

From its beginnings until the first half of the 20th century, ethnological reflection was extensively concerned with discovering how to reconcile the postulated unity of its object with the diversity and often incomparability of its particular manifestations. To do so, the notion of civilization, connoting a set of general, universal and transmissible capacities, had to make room for that of culture in a new accepted sense, for it denotes as many specific and non-transmissible lifestyles perceptible in the form of tangible embodiments – techniques, mores, customs, institutions and beliefs – rather than virtual capacities, and corresponding to observable values instead of truths or supposed truths.

Now the notion of culture immediately presents problems that are, if I may say so, those of its use in the singular and in the plural. If culture – in the singular and, if need be, with a capital C – is the distinguishing attribute of the human condition, what universal traits does it include and how is its nature to be defined? But if culture is reflected only in prodigiously diverse forms illustrated, each in its own manner, by the thousands of societies that exist or have existed on earth, are all these

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forms equivalent or are they open to value judgements which, in the affirmative, will inevitably affect the meaning of the notion itself?

The essential task taken on by anthropology is to overcome the apparent antinomy between the oneness of the human condition and the inexhaustible plurality of the forms in which we apprehend it. This task was present from the outset among Unesco's concerns and has, in the Organization as well, grown in importance.

In the wake of the Second World War, what with the horror caused by racist doctrines and their pursuance through the massacre of entire populations and the extermination camps, it was only to be expected that Unesco would regard as its most urgent task the scientific criticism and moral censure of the notion of race. Hence the two successive declarations on race, in 1951 and 1952 respectively. Why two? This was because the first, sociologically inspired one was seen by biologists as too simplistic. After the second declaration, it seemed, Unesco was able to consider the problem to have been settled once and for all.

Around 1950, however, population genetics had not really come into its own. It nowadays prompts us to recognize that the oneness of the human person, which it does not question, is of greater complexity. Behind this oneness, it discerns what it calls fuzzy sets of genetic variants that cross and intersect, become isolated, disperse or run together in the course of time, and whose identification can be genuinely useful in medicine. While continuing to proclaim the oneness of the human person, we have to keep abreast of scientific research and make adjustments as necessary, which is what Unesco did in two subsequent declarations in 1964 and 1967. This is a particularly necessary task in view of some disquieting recent publications by biologists attempting to rehabilitate the notion of race, if only in **acceptations** differing from those it may have had in the past, but which nevertheless remain sensitive.

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Recognition of cultural diversity and the protection of cultural identities under threat form the second segment of this mission of Unesco in which anthropology also sees its place. Unesco first conceived it from the angle of the world's heritage, where such diversity is to be seen spread over time, as it were. It more recently undertook to envisage it also in space, including therein all its modalities throughout the world and which, being intangible and so devoid of tangible reality, are liable to disappear without trace.

What we are concerned with here are oral traditions, knowledge of nature and the world, traditional skills of a variety of crafts, and, most importantly, the languages that are their common means of expression. For, admittedly in an intangible form, each language constitutes through its internal structure a monument as precious as the masterpieces of architecture on Unesco's World Heritage List. Each language perceives and segments the world in its own distinctive way and, on account of its structure, opens up an original path to getting to know it.

So mindful is Unesco of this central role of language, so evidently eager to enlist linguists worldwide for the study and maintenance of languages threatened with extinction, as in the presentation of its Medium-Term Strategy for 2002–7, that I shall

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not dwell on the matter except just to tell a little tale that I think deserves to go on record.

In Canada, some 30 years ago, I was waiting on the coast of British Columbia for the ferry that was to take me to the small island of Alert Bay, a reserve of the Indians called Kwakiutl in ethnological literature and who describe themselves as Kwakwaka'wakw. I got into conversation on the quay with a young passenger dressed in a very vividly coloured jogging suit. He was a Kwakiutl Indian but brought up outside the reserve from early childhood, and he had decided to settle there to learn traditional sculpture. It was, he explained, a trade that enabled you to escape taxation. 'But the difficulty', he added, 'is that I'll have to start by learning the language.'

I was struck by that remark: for that seriously acculturated boy it stood to reason that traditional art, the myths and legends that it illustrates, and the language itself go to make up a whole. We know that the Kwakiutl and their neighbours of British Columbia and Alaska are the creators of graphic and plastic works of powerful originality. Stifled for several decades by official hounding, these arts, whose fate is inseparably bound up with that of the language, had since the middle of the last century been picking up again.

Now last year I was to receive a call for help from the chief of the Kwakwaka'wakw nations. The number of speakers of his language, Kwakwala, he wrote me, was down to barely 200 individuals. From other all-too-numerous examples, Unesco has become convinced that languages are a treasure, in themselves for a start and because their disappearance entails that of beliefs, skills, usages, arts and traditions that are all irreplaceable items of the heritage of humanity.

As Unesco emphasizes throughout its material, these fears are unfortunately all too justified by the accelerated impoverishment of cultural diversity caused by this fearsome conjunction of phenomena called globalization.

An unprecedented occurrence in the history of humanity, this globalization is largely due to the population explosion that has, in less than a century, seen a four-fold increase in the numbers of the human species and is where we should see the true disaster. Yet we should perhaps take a closer look at history in search of sets of circumstances that could, admittedly on a considerably smaller scale, represent precedents.

In this respect, a distant resemblance exists between how, at present, globalization tends to standardize cultures and the state of affairs that art historians gave the significant name of International Gothic. For a number of decades approximately covering the final quarter of the 14th century and the first half of the 15th, the great increase in trading and the zeal of collectors and merchants made it practically impossible to discern the provenances of pictorial works. Spread throughout Europe as a result of reciprocal influences, this international style set about deforming the appearance of the human body by distorting certain proportions or featuring extravagant clothing and a superabundance of ornament and finery. At the same time, it was plainly obsessed with death and its frightening aspects.

Is there not, within certain trends of our contemporary arts, a not merely formal but substantive resemblance? There is to be seen in both cases an eagerness to distort the human body, whether through appearance – with a figurative costume or repre-

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sentation – or through treatment of the body itself as an object; in addition to a resolve to include in the field of art even the most repulsive aspects of the human condition.

The parallel is so striking that one might be tempted, on the basis of these examples alone, to formulate a law of the cultural consequences of globalization. I shall steer clear of that. I referred to the case of International Gothic just to emphasize that, far from spreading, that state of indistinctness was the setting from which sprang and diverged, while maintaining contact, the Flemish and the Italian schools of painting, which were the most markedly diverse forms in western art.

Time does not always move in the same direction. The pervasive reign of uniformity may be followed by unforeseen reversals. That happened in the past and we may venture to hope that the current globalization process is engendering new forms of diversity whose nature as yet escapes us.

However that may be, after the rejection of unilinear development, to escape the pessimism the present state of the world may prompt, it is by going back to certain ideas of Giambattista Vico, the founder in the 18th century of a new concept of history, that a measure of hope will be restored. His *Corsi e Ricorsi* theory invites us to see in each period of history the projection on another plane of a model already present in a previous cycle. History is thus postulated to move in a spiral course.

By giving house-room in historical analysis to a degree of periodicity, we find grounds for moderate optimism. We also reconcile the different conceptions of time held by the ancient philosophers, the thinkers of the East and the Far East, and the indigenous peoples. Furthermore, human history is restored to its place among the other manifestations of life since, in this perspective, some traits that had been considered specifically human may be seen as the resurgence, in the realm of thought, of properties inherent in life itself, as suggested by the similarity of structure between the genetic code and articulate speech, highlighted by the leading linguist Roman Jakobson in a report written for Unesco, which it published in 1970.

For its part, Unesco has always recognized the existence of a link between cultural diversity and biodiversity. The 1972 Convention on the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage even then brought the two aspects closer together by associating with the cultural heritage 'habitats of threatened species of animals and plants'. Unesco has moreover established worldwide some 500 biosphere reserves to safeguard remarkable cases of biodiversity.

Over the years, it gave this link ever greater importance in seeking to understand its reasons. Hence, in his Proposals for 2006–7, the Director-General emphasizes the existence of a 'cultural diversity-biodiversity nexus'. It indeed seems to me that, to develop differences, for the thresholds making a culture distinguishable from its neighbours to become sufficiently clear-cut, the conditions are roughly the same as those fostering biological differentiation: relative isolation for a long period; and only limited exchanges, whether cultural or genetic. Cultural barriers are of much the same nature as biological barriers; the latter prefigure them all the more closely in that all cultures impress their mark on the body through styles of costume, headgear and ornament, through bodily mutilations and through body-language patterns; and they mirror differences comparable to those recognized between varieties within one and the same species.

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Cultural diversity and biodiversity are therefore not just phenomena of the same type. They are intrinsically linked and we are made constantly more aware that, on a human scale, the problem of cultural diversity reflects a much broader problem whose solution is still more urgent, that of the relations between humans and other living species; and we realize that it would be no use seeking to overcome it in the first instance without also addressing it in the other, given that the respect we wish to obtain from individual human beings towards cultures different from theirs is but one particular case of the respect they should feel for all forms of life. By isolating humans from the rest of creation and defining too narrowly the limits of that separation, western humanism inherited from antiquity and the Renaissance has resulted in the rejection, outside arbitrarily drawn borders, of ever more neighbouring fractions of a humanity to whom it was particularly easy to refuse the same dignity as the rest enjoyed, since it had been forgotten that the human individual is primarily to be respected as a living being rather than as lord and master of creation: an initial recognition that would have compelled humans to show respect for all living beings.

These truths would be self-evident for the peoples studied by ethnologists. It is therefore gratifying that international organizations, with Unesco to the fore, are giving ever-greater attention to their vital interests and their philosophical thinking.

By wise customs that we would be wrong to regard as superstitions, these peoples limit the human consumption of other living species and impose moral respect associated with rules to ensure their conservation. Such are the lessons that ethnologists have learned from them, while hoping that, when it helps them join the concert of nations, Unesco will also assist them in their quest to keep these principles intact and will encourage others to be guided thereby.

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