

EXTENDING CULTURAL DEMOCRACY: FROM THE FESTIVAL TO UNESCO

RICHARD KURIN, DIRECTOR, SMITHSONIAN CENTER FOR
FOLKLIFE AND CULTURAL HERITAGE

This past year the United States rejoined UNESCO, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, after a 19-year hiatus. The United States had been a founding member of the organization, established in 1945 in the wake of World War II. UNESCO's *raison d'être* is summed up in the words of American poet Archibald MacLeish included in its constitution: "Since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defenses of peace must be constructed." Though active in UNESCO for almost four decades, the United States withdrew in 1984, claiming that the body was overly bureaucratic, biased against the United States, and hostile to a free press. Two decades ago, just before the split, Ralph Rinzler, the founding director of the Smithsonian's Folklife Festival, served as vice chair for culture of the U.S. National Commission for UNESCO. Now, as the United States has re-entered UNESCO, the Festival—because of its philosophy, methodology, and national standing—has had an immediate impact upon UNESCO cultural programs and approaches, illustrating how activities to encourage cultural democracy at the Smithsonian and on the National Mall may indeed reach around the globe.

UNESCO's Cultural Program

UNESCO, part of the U.N. family of organizations, includes 190 member nations. It is headquartered in Paris, and has an international staff of about 2,000 employees and an annual budget of about \$300 million. This relatively small size for an inter-governmental organization belies a broader reach for the agency through UNESCO national commissions—generally consisting of government officials, private citizens, educators, scholars, and scientists in each member state and hundreds of associated non-governmental educational, scientific, and cultural organizations. UNESCO has ambitious programs in education, science, and communication. Current priorities in these areas include literacy, access to public education, and HIV/AIDS awareness, protocols for ethics in scientific research, and broadening the availability of digital resources around the world.

The philosophy behind UNESCO's cultural program is provided in its constitution, which states that "ignorance of each other's ways and lives has been a common cause" of war, and that the "wide diffusion of culture" is "indispensable to the dignity of man" and constitutes "a sacred duty which all the nations must fulfill" by "means of communication between their peoples" and "for the purposes of mutual understanding and a truer and more perfect knowledge of each other's lives." To achieve this, UNESCO operates a multifaceted worldwide cultural operation, striking for its scope, prestige, and influence given its relatively paltry \$25 million annual budget.

UNESCO is probably best known for the World Heritage List—a program that recognizes significant cultural monuments and archaeological and natural sites and encourages their preservation and protection. Among the more than 700 sites recognized are the Statue of Liberty, the Everglades, Puerto Rico's old San Juan, Haiti's Citadel, India's Taj Mahal, and the Great Wall of China. UNESCO has also

mobilized expertise and financial resources for cultural work ranging from the digitization of archives and documentary publication of world music, to the enhancement of museums and attempts to record and save endangered languages. Its compilation of the World Culture Report has helped identify trends and issues. UNESCO has supported scholarly and educational programs on the cultural aspects of international exchanges that cross continents, oceans, and centuries—as for example its programs on the Silk Road and the current International Year to Commemorate the Struggle against Slavery and its Abolition. It also publishes work on cultural policy—generally tying together concerns for and about human rights, sustainable development, and cultural diversity.

UNESCO also develops normative instruments in the cultural field—international conventions or treaties, recommendations, and declarations. This function was at the heart of UNESCO's early post-World War II work, when it served as the intergovernmental organization concerned with copyright and related creative rights. Some treaties developed through UNESCO have been ratified by the United States, including the 1970 Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property. This has a heightened current relevance given the U.S. presence in Iraq and its attempts, aided by UNESCO, to track and return the artifacts infamously looted from museums and archaeological sites in the wake of the war. Another instrument, the 2003 Declaration concerning the Intentional Destruction of Cultural Heritage, was a reaction to the demolition of the Bamiyan Buddha statues in Afghanistan by the Taliban despite strong UNESCO efforts to protect them. Since assuming the UNESCO helm in 1999, Director-General Koïchiro Matsuura has made new cultural conventions a priority.

In many of these projects, UNESCO has continued to work closely with American institutions and experts, even during the period when the United States had withdrawn from the organization. For example, in 1999, the Smithsonian Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage co-convened a conference of experts from 27 nations in Washington, coinciding with the Folklife Festival on the Mall, to evaluate the UNESCO Recommendation on the Safeguarding of Traditional Culture and Folklore. Tony Seeger, the director emeritus of Smithsonian Folkways Recordings, has worked closely with UNESCO on its world music recording project; staff member James Early, now acting director of the Anacostia Museum, has been involved in UNESCO cultural policy dialogues; senior folklorist Peter Seitel has helped redefine UNESCO orientations to folklore and living cultural heritage; and I, among other involvements, have served as a member of UNESCO's international jury to select their Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity—a recently established program somewhat parallel to the World Heritage List.

Cultural Treaties

The United States rejoins UNESCO just as two new cultural treaties have come to the fore. One, the international Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, was approved overwhelmingly by the UNESCO General Conference in October 2003. Some 120 member nations voted for the convention; scores more registered their support subsequently. No one voted against it; only a handful of nations abstained—Australia, Canada, Great Britain, Switzerland, and the United States among them. The other, currently in the form of the Universal

Declaration on Cultural Diversity, was slated by the General Conference to move toward a convention by 2005. Together they represent a growing multilateral response to globalization that many nations and people believe is challenging the viability of their local, regional, and national cultures—and that many associate with an overwhelmingly American mass commercial culture.

Cultural treaties are somewhat of an anathema for the United States. Not only has culture historically not been high on the U.S. foreign policy agenda, but it also is a domain that even domestically is not traditionally subject to a great deal of regulation. The United States has a generally *laissez faire* approach to cultural activity, leaving it mainly to the private sector and the marketplace, considering it largely a matter of individual choice. While the federal government helps support a number of institutions that undertake cultural work—the National Park Service, the Smithsonian Institution, the Library of Congress, the National Endowment for the Arts, and the National Endowment for the Humanities, among others—its overall support is relatively miniscule and generally non-prescriptive beyond the bounds of their respective programs. Unlike many other nations, the United States does not have a ministry of culture, nor enforceable forms of official culture—such as language or religion. Indeed, Americans as a rule regard culture as a matter of freedom—of association, of speech, of religion, and so on. To be sure, Americans strongly debate cultural issues, though such debates typically involve the degree to which tolerance for and rights of private behavior should be recognized and accepted in the public sphere.

Intangible Cultural Heritage

Though the United States may have an inherent lack of enthusiasm for cultural regulation, the international Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage was consistent with many public-sector practices. The convention, now awaiting ratification by 30 members before it can go into effect, advocates universal respect for cultural traditions, but imposes no new or special intellectual property rights or legal protections. It is largely directed toward traditional culture and calls for national governments to inventory their “intangible cultural heritage”—living traditions of music, narrative, craftsmanship, forms of folk knowledge, rituals and celebrations, all consistent with human rights—and devise action plans for safeguarding them. The convention calls upon national agencies to work closely with cultural practitioners on research and documentation projects, educational programs, national honors, protective laws, and economic development plans, so that the traditions are kept alive and transmitted to the next generation. UNESCO will extend its Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity to a list of traditions to be recognized, as well as establish a list of endangered traditions meriting immediate international support for their survival. Whether these measures are effective and equal to the large and complex task is questionable, but the convention gives professionals and communities an added tool for charting their cultural futures.

The treaty has its flaws, and indeed, one could question whether a treaty is really needed in this case; a strong action program might suffice. Nonetheless, the U.S. abstention was somehow ironic. The convention evolved from a much more state-run, “top-down,” archivally oriented 1989 UNESCO Recommendation on the Safeguarding of Traditional Culture and Folklore that tended to “freeze” and idealize national culture and limit citizen participation in efforts to both preserve

and energize it. Changes resulting in the new convention grew directly from a critique of that approach offered by U.S. experts, key among them Smithsonian staff members Seitel, Seeger, Early, Amy Horowitz, Olivia Cadaval, Diana N'Diaye, Frank Proschan, fellow Anthony McCann, associate Leslie Prosterman, and community-oriented cultural workers including Hawai'i's Pualani Kanaka'ole Kanahele, India's Rajeev Sethi, Ecuador's Miguel Puwainchir, and the Bahamas' Gail Saunders, all of whom have cooperated closely with the Festival over the years. Such contributions were based upon best practices to conserve and encourage living cultural traditions, many inspired by the Festival. Consequently, the UNESCO convention was re-oriented toward promoting the ongoing vitality of local-level, grassroots cultures. The convention became profoundly democratic, and stressed community participation and integration with local economic development and education efforts. Importantly, it also encouraged respect for diversity within nations, while recognizing, as its limits, accepted human rights provisions.

U.S. support for the convention, even with reservations, would have cost little—as cultural agencies already do the work it envisions—and it would have helped buttress U.S. accomplishments and leadership in this arena not only by the Smithsonian, but by our colleagues in the American Folklife Center of the Library of Congress, the Traditional Arts Program of the National Endowment for the Arts, the National Park Service, the National Council for the Traditional Arts, as well as many other state, regional, and non-profit organizations.

Cultural Diversity

The second initiative, UNESCO's effort to turn the 2001 Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity into an international convention, is far more problematic. Its recognition of cultural diversity as basic to human existence—parallel to biological diversity in the natural world and thus worthy of being sustained—is little contested. The declaration holds that there are different ways of being human, and those ways are worthy of respect as long as they are in keeping with human rights. It also asserts that various cultural enterprises, though they may be economic, are crucial to the ongoing identity and sustainability of a nation's culture.

Therein is the underlying, motivating issue of the proposed convention. The current declaration focuses (as presumably the draft convention will also) on the national culture of the state—not on the culturally diverse traditions of communities and ethnic and regional groups found within its borders. This is not an instrument directed toward ensuring respect and legal protections for minority cultural groups or subnational cultures. Rather, it is to assert economic nationalism, even protectionism, on the basis of preserving the diversity of national cultures. The proposed treaty, somewhat misnamed, seeks to encourage the growth and sustenance of nation-based cultural industries—e.g., French wines, Canadian television, Arabic publications, Chinese films. The argument is that the cultural industries of many countries face economic threats to their survival due primarily to the global reach of American-based cultural products. The financial success of such country-based cultural industries is key to the sustainability of national cultures; how can French national culture, for example, be sustained without the active and successful promulgation of French films, books, television programs, recordings, wine, cheese, and other consumables?

The proposed treaty thus sets the stage for cultural exceptionalism in world trade policy. According to the treaty's advocates—and there are many—free trade

has its limits; it should not put a nation's culture in jeopardy, nor threaten the diversity of the world's cultures. A strong fight is expected as the proposed treaty moves through various drafts and into final form. It is reasonable to expect that it will be the United States versus most of the world on this one—as even the Australians and Canadians are keen to safeguard their media industries. Key to its acceptance will be the definition of those cultural goods and enterprises to which it will apply. If the scope is very broad—encompassing widely produced goods, for large markets, and involving digital and electronic technologies—there will be greater contention among those seeking to dominate markets on the one hand, and enter them on the other.

Pursuing Cultural Democracy

Through debates over such treaties, as well as in the operation of UNESCO's cultural programs, the United States has important contributions to make. First, it can represent its own cultural issues and approaches with far greater richness and nuance than usually appreciated by other nations. It can both undo and flesh out stereotypical visions of a complex American cultural reality that can helpfully create needed empathies throughout the world. The United States is likely the most diverse nation on earth, and, despite a number of historical failings, is nonetheless the most successful in providing a home for people from around the globe. It should not cede its leadership in this arena. Second, the United States can learn from fellow UNESCO members about the cultural issues they face and the programs and policies they have developed to deal with them. Sometimes these foreshadow American issues—such as with increasingly large and assertive religious and linguistic minorities. Listening to others also provides insights to the beliefs and values that shape perceptions of the United States, its people and culture—of obvious importance after 9/11 and in the global climate of threats of terrorism. Finally, by actively engaging UNESCO, its members, and programs, the United States can help promulgate civic cultural values that have been at the core of its national experience and have fueled the human rights movement. If in rejoining UNESCO and participating as an active, strong member, the United States can convey the importance of cultural democracy—culture of, by, and for the people—of citizen participation, of the value of fundamental human freedoms, and the importance of toleration and respect for cultural differences, it will then have played a role worthy of and commensurate with its standing in the world.

The Festival both mirrors and contributes to these values and orientations. It provides a model of cultural democracy in action for Americans as well as for people of other nations. Cooperation with UNESCO can help extend that model. This year, UNESCO has helped support the Haitian program at the Festival through its program to Commemorate the Struggle against Slavery and its Abolition. Our scholars have contributed to UNESCO conferences and publications. Experts from other nations, beginning to apply UNESCO's provisions under the convention for intangible cultural heritage, have sought the advice and counsel of Smithsonian staff and looked to emulate some of the Festival's documentary approaches and public presentation practices. Finally, talks have begun to feature the worldwide community-based cultural programs of UNESCO on the National Mall at a future Smithsonian Folklife Festival.