

"Globalization and Diversity, UNESCO and Cultural-Policy Making: Imperatives for U.S. Arts and Culture Practitioners and Organizations"
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I must explain why I have been placed at the top of this long agenda. I wish to set a context for our discussion by describing where the U.S. re-entry into UNESCO stands today. I shall do my best to catch a fast-moving target and provide a snapshot of relations between the world's two most complex organizations: UNESCO on the one hand and US Civil Society on the other.

Americans for UNESCO, which I now head and from which base I speak, was founded by Jack Fobes in 1984, when the U.S. withdrew from UNESCO. He wanted to facilitate continuing US cooperation with the member of the UN family specifically devoted to culture, education and intellect. Fobes, former Deputy Director General of UNESCO, from his base in Asheville NC, gathered a score or more of UNESCO veterans and watchers who met regularly to compare notes and help carry out his mission. As a secondary role, Fobes sought to remind US policy makers of the precious asset that had been trashed by the US withdrawal.

American' for UNESCO (AU) did not place Government relations as the first order of business. Our primary purpose was to serve as facilitator and channel for relations between UNESCO and American civil society. Since the US National Commission for UNESCO had been dismantled, we reluctantly but resolutely filled the gap as best we could, without the slightest intention of replacing that indispensable body over time.

When the U.S. announced it would rejoin UNESCO, AU debated disbanding. We knew that a re-born US Commission would predictably follow, but we feared it would be slow to emerge and take time to find its footing. So we decided to persist, to keep on helping, as best we could, where we could. Ultimately we looked forward eagerly to the day when we could meet with the Chair and Executive Committee of the new Commission, decide whether we had a continuing role, and if so to devise ways of complementing the Commission's work as a kind of adjunct or auxiliary. As of our meeting today, the Commission is still in gestation. It is not likely to gather for its first meeting any earlier than mid-2005.

The focus of our meeting today falls, by necessity, on the unruly question of "cultural diversity." One must wonder how such a harmless phrase could become so contentious; but it is obvious, primarily because the U.S. chose to absent itself from the debate two decades ago, that the question has become needlessly--perhaps hopelessly--snarled.

The cultural dialogue between the U.S. and the other member-states of UNESCO has never been easy. In an organization whose 190 member-states include a vast majority of statist, centralized governmental systems, the U.S. has always been the odd man out. We Americans are proud of our non system of private-sector organizations and the vital roles they play, but beyond our shores the rest of the world remains baffled by the US exception.

In the case of so-called "cultural diversity" (in fact the Convention's draft title covers the "Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Contents and

Artistic Expressions”), the discussion has gone on far too long and proceeded much too far for latecomer US negotiators to shape easily. Their room for maneuver, as it is in all multilateral organizations, is limited by the desideratum that the U.S. not be seen to impose its unilateral will. Specifically, as the Convention’s real title indicates, this discussion has stepped squarely onto the turf of the World Trade Organization, concerned as it is with culture’s products rather than culture itself. In fact, the Convention, in the wording of its early sections, does speak nobly to the diversity of cultures. It is only when trade issues take over that the specters of protectionism and state control haunts the negotiators. These two buzz words are red-flags for well-organized and emotion-driven sectors of American life: the commercial cultural industries and those who fear any state intervention in their lives. Whether the US negotiators will be able to persuade the rest of the world that a Convention, binding on its signatories- some of which take the obligation more seriously than others, must take into account the sacred separation of civil society and state which marks the U.S. and nurtures its creativity--this remains to be seen. It is already very late.

There is saving grace in the fact that the worst outcome for the U.S. is hopeless but perhaps not serious. If the U.S. is unable to sign the Convention, it is hard to see that much damage will be done within the confines of our nation. Abroad however, there is a double threat: first, that the predictions of state control will come true and that protectionist barriers will rise; and second, that the attempt to put a human face on globalization will be set back. If the negotiation is allowed to take its time, the U.S. may be able to make its position understandable.

Looking ahead, without the pressures of time, it is my belief that U.S. engagement with UNESCO--and I stress the word “engagement” as opposed to “confrontation”--will help the rest of the world understand how to deal with, and

perhaps benefit from, the great American exception. On the real issue of cultural diversity, the US and its commitment to genuine and working pluralism will always serve as an example to the rest of the world. But the commerce in cultural products like films, in a world obsessed with the negative side of globalization, is seen as part of the threat of massive US power. Globalization as a threat will recede when its positive aspects are seen to outweigh the negatives and when globalization's benefits have been demonstrated to all, beyond reasonable doubt and over a substantial span of time.

In the longer run, constructive US engagement with UNESCO is the order of the day. But successful engagement is not an automatic given. On this point, the U.S. will have to do a lot better than it has in the past. We must not forget that UNESCO was virtually an American idea, springing from the thought of men like Sumner Welles, Laurence Duggan, J. William Fulbright, Ralph Turner, Archibald MacLeish and dozens of other internationalists like Jack Fobes, all of whom resolved in 1945 that there must never be another world war. But the past US record in handling the responsibility of UNESCO membership has not been inspiring. Given American discomfort with the very notion of "culture" and the media's total disinterest in the organization, a variety of essential practices between 1946 and 1984 were carried out badly--appointments to the National Commission, staff and budgeting for the Commission, ambassadorial appointments, stable Congressional budgets, assistance in hiring and defending superb US staff in UNESCO, the growth of expertise in UNESCO affairs in government agencies, universities and corporate board rooms, and consistent mishandling over the decades of US public policy in Education, Science, Culture, Communication and Social Sciences--none of these have been strong suits in US political life. Even the great US civil society has not always

carried its full share of the weight; witness the failure to transform its dismay when the U.S. announced its forthcoming withdrawal in 1983 into effective political action.

UNESCO is arguably the most complex organization in the world--with the possible exception of US civil society. UNESCO accepts after all the responsibility for pondering the deepest issues in human life, as they focus in the sciences, in education, in communications, in the social sciences, and in that vast field called "culture" which so few Americans fully understand or can even define.

America's future in UNESCO is only as bright as Americans like those in this room will commit themselves to making it. Success will not happen without all of us.

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