



INSIGHTS

Behind UNESCO's Crisis: Noble Sentiments in Ambiguous Translation

By Henry Tanner

International Herald Tribune

The crisis of UNESCO is an explosive mixture of many different ingredients: Ideological warfare. Propaganda. Conflict between different cultures. Clashes of national interest. Regionalism. Administrative mismanagement. Faulty structures. Personal ambitions and animosities. Imagined wrongs as well as established facts.

The roots of the problem go back to the founding days nearly 38 years ago.

People who have been involved with UNESCO over the years point out that, in its origins, the organization was the most idealistic, most ambitious and perhaps least realistic of the specialized agencies in the United Nations system. It dealt with ideas instead of scientific specifics, as did the International Atomic Energy Agency, or medical development, like the World Health Organization.

Its motto, ascribed to the poet Archibald MacLeish and the British prime minister, Clement Attlee, was: "Since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that defenses of peace must be constructed." The means were to be "equal education for all, the unrestricted pursuit of objective truth and the free exchange of ideas and knowledge."

The noble sentiments are still being hurled back and forth in UNESCO debates, as each side claims a monopoly on them and accuses its opponents of violating them.

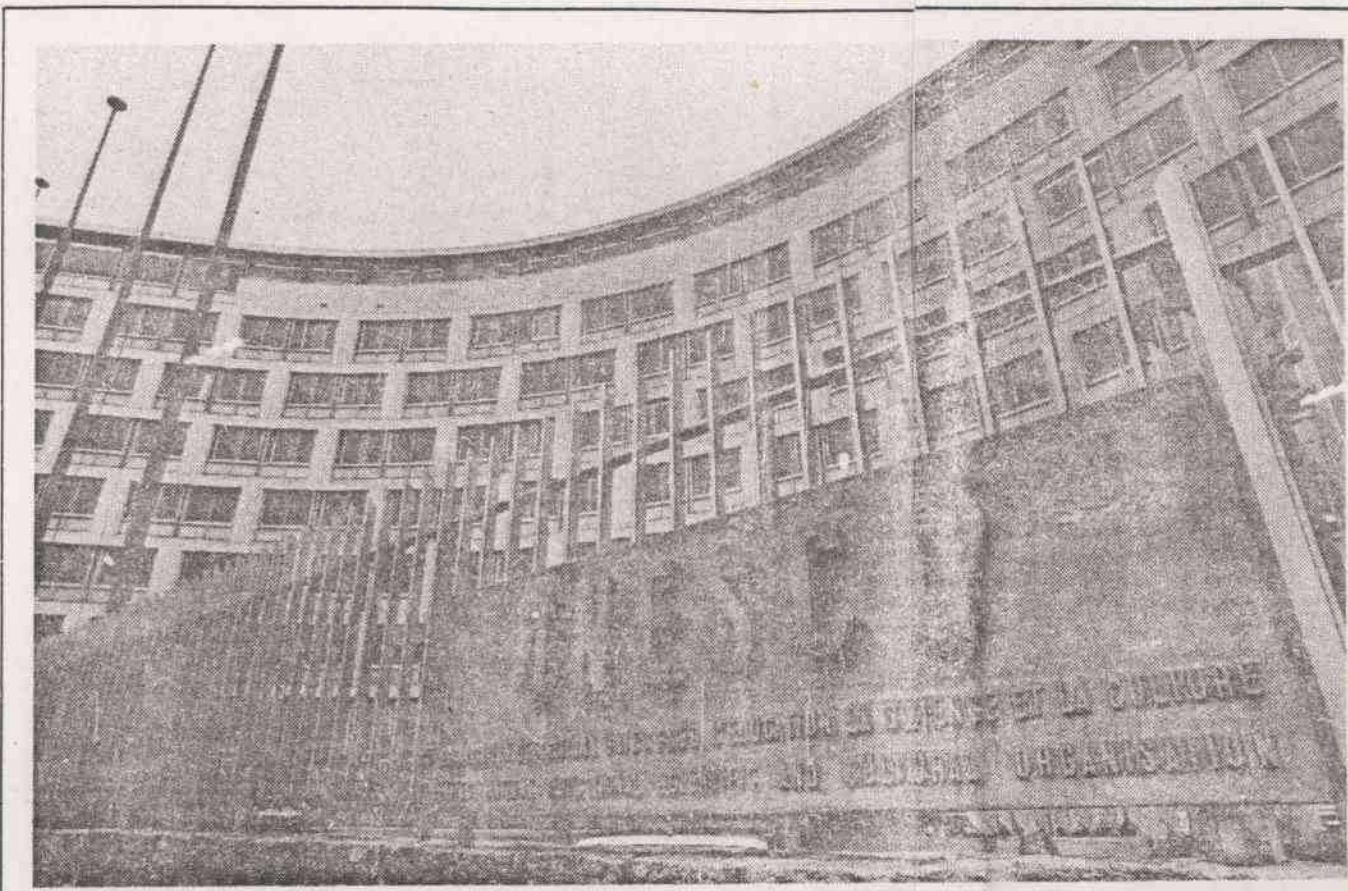
The lofty mandate was more vague in its definition than the task of any other international agency. UNESCO soon became the least manageable and least understood part of the United Nations. Even its structure was found to be ambiguous — part under the control and influence of governments pursuing their own national interests and part a place for "people speaking to people."

No one takes issue with the American contention that the organization has undergone a tremendous change since it was founded in London in November 1945, largely at the initiative of Britain and France.

When it became operative a year later in Paris, it was a club of 28 largely like-minded nations.

Its first director-general was Julian Huxley of Britain, one of the outstanding scientists of his time, who had thought deeply about the interplay of science, education, society and peace.

The staff comprised about a hundred people



The headquarters building, in Paris, of the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization.

and the budget was \$7 million. Today, with 161 member states, the budget is \$374 million.

In the early years, the Western powers were among themselves. The Russians entered in the late 1950s after they came to the opposite conclusion that the Reagan administration seems to have drawn — namely, that absence does not make for increased influence. They brought the other members of the Soviet bloc with them.

A period of East-West polarization and an initial increase in the politicization of UNESCO followed.

The fundamental shift of power and the second polarization — this one between North and South — occurred with the process of decolonization in the 1960s and the emergence of scores of new nations, who placed great hopes in UNESCO.

"At the outset, UNESCO was a laboratory for Western ideas based on 18th-century enlightenment; now it is a laboratory of Third World ideas tinged with 19th-century Marxism. One conformism has replaced another, and of course the losers are upset," a longtime former employee of UNESCO said.

The newly independent nations of Africa and Asia today have an overwhelming majority in the two bodies of UNESCO that function as parliamentary units, the 161-member general conference and the 51-member executive board. They also impose their will directly or indirectly on the executive arm, the secretariat, where they are the dominating factor under the organization's first African director-general.

For the Western industrialized nations, the minority role has been made more galling by the fact that they continue to pay most of the bills without having much influence on how the money is spent.

Eight nations pay for about 72 percent of the budget. They are the United States, 25 percent;

the Soviet Union, 10.41 percent; Japan 10.19 percent; West Germany 8.44 percent; France 6.43 percent; Britain 4.61 percent; Italy 3.69 percent; Canada 3.04 percent.

Several European countries and Australia pay between 1 percent and 2 percent each; all the others contribute less than 1 percent.

One or two delegates privately dream of weighted voting according to financial contributions or a Security Council-type setup with veto rights for the major powers. But even they know that this is a dream.

The Reagan administration, in its notice to withdraw, charged that the majority is "riding roughshod" over the minority.

In its list of complaints, it also says that, more and more, "UNESCO's programs and personnel are heavily politicized" and used for "anti-American ends" that "frequently coincide" with positions held by the Soviet Union.

There is wide support among West European nations for the American charge that politicization of the organization has gone too far and is still growing. A Western working paper uses the terms "over-politicization" and "undue politicization" and relates them specifically to the change in membership which has put the industrial nations in the minority.

But many non-American diplomats say that UNESCO has always been more political than most people admitted. They add that the United States, when it was still leading the majority, also used the organization for political purposes, for instance in putting the Korean War on the agenda of the executive board in the 1950s.

Last year, the shooting down of a Korean airliner by a Soviet fighter was raised by U.S. delegates in UNESCO meetings, and the U.S.-led invasion of Grenada was brought before the organization by the Russians, Cubans and others.

UNESCO's vague ideological mandate thrust the organization into every possible battle between opposing philosophical concepts and different cultures and made confrontation inevitable from the start.

Writers and thinkers wrote early on that the trouble with UNESCO was that it was aiming at the unreachable, a reconciliation of conflicting ideologies.

UNESCO is based on two fine fictions, according to Richard Hoggart, a British scholar

who was assistant director-general under René Maheu.

The first fiction, Mr. Hoggart wrote, quoting the Swedish sociologist Gunnar Myrdal, was the belief that an international organization could be something more and better than its component parts, its member states.

The second fiction, he said, is enshrined in the preamble of the UNESCO constitution: "Believing in the full and equal opportunities for education for all, in the unrestricted pursuit of objective truth, and in the free exchange of ideas and knowledge," the signatory nations say they are "agreed and determined to develop the means of communication between their peoples and to employ these means for the purposes of mutual understanding..."

But, Mr. Hoggart wrote, "it is not in the nature of governments to believe in such things [as] the free pursuit of objective truth and the free exchange of knowledge." He added that governments find such ideas suspect and embarrassing and thus "their instinct is to clamp down."

Mr. Hoggart also quoted the French writer Jacques Maritain, who was UNESCO's president just after World War II, as saying in 1947: "Since ideologies divide us, how can we agree on any worthwhile action?" Berardo Croce, another thinker cited by Mr. Hoggart, predicted about the same time that governments with opposing ideological views would never be able to proclaim a joint declaration of human rights that would not prove either empty or arbitrary.

There is, moreover, an inherent, perhaps destructive ambiguity in UNESCO's makeup. Its founders wanted it to be a place where "people speak to people... about the ultimate things in life." They wanted to give much of the influence in the organization to individual thinkers, educators and scientists as opposed to government officials and diplomats. But gradually, ever more openly and inevitably, the governments took over the organization.

The executive board, UNESCO's watchdog, was meant to be made up of independent personalities. Today, its members all are government representatives. The secretariat also was to be made up mostly of independent minds. Today, most if not all important staff members are appointed after clearance by their governments, East and West.

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After 10 Years as Director, M'Bow Personifies Power

The imposing figure of Amadou Mahtar M'Bow, the Senegalese director-general, stands at the center of the UNESCO

One reason is the extraordinary power he wields within the organization. According to all accounts, he rules king-like over the secretariat, which has no outstanding personality left who would dare to challenge him.

But the same was said in almost identical terms about his predecessor, René Maheu, a French intellectual with the reputation of a strong-willed authoritarian who would take neither criticism nor advice.

Mr. Maheu dramatically expanded the already great powers of the director-general during his 13 years in office — half the period of UNESCO's existence at that time.

Mr. M'Bow, the first African to become director-general, inherited Mr. Maheu's powers and increased them tremendously.

Where Mr. Maheu had to negotiate with the power blocs within the organization, Mr. M'Bow has the automatic majority of the Africans and most other Third World powers behind him regardless of what he does, not only in the secretariat but also in the two UNESCO parliamentary units, the 161-member general conference and the 51-member executive board.

This has affected the discussion over the U.S. decision to withdraw from UNESCO. Many delegations are more cautious than they would be with another director-general because they think it is counterproductive to take on Mr. M'Bow personally.

"You attack M'Bow and the African delegations will rise like one man against you," a delegate said.

Nevertheless, Mr. M'Bow is deeply controversial as well as powerful.

There is bad blood between him and several Western ambassadors because he has "lectured them like school boys in public," according to other diplomats.

He has been the target of sharp personal attacks in Western newspapers, some of which have questioned everything about him from his political independence to his probity.

He is the target of almost all the U.S. criticism directed at UNESCO. While Secretary of State George P. Shultz, in his letter accompanying Washington's notice to withdraw, expressed his "personal esteem" for Mr. M'Bow, the sharpest words in the document were aimed at his leadership.

The U.S. charges include management failures "at every level," overcentralized decision-making, refusal to delegate authority, a climate of "uncertainty, distrust and even fear" in the secretariat, delays in filling staff vacancies, appointment of third- and fourth-rate personnel.

On policy, the document states that "nearly everything proposed by the director-general" is accepted by the general conference and the executive board, thus making him personally responsible for what the Reagan administration perceives as anti-American moves regarding the press, human rights, growth of the budget and, above all, UNESCO's increasing "politicization."

Mr. M'Bow's name does not appear in the 65-page document. But when asked about his role, the U.S. ambassador, Mrs. Jean Gerard, says firmly: "He is in charge, isn't he?"

When the U.S. decision was first announced, it was widely speculated outside the organization that Mr. M'Bow would have to resign so the United States would stay.

Today it is clear that he has no intention of stepping down. He is likely to continue as the man in charge even if UNESCO's budget is slashed by 25 percent — the current U.S. share — and its operations are reduced.

Even anti-M'Bow sources think it improbable that the African-Asian-Arab majority would permit him to be forced out by U.S. pressure. "They would see it as 'knuckling-under to colonialism' and they will never do it," a diplomat said, adding that the Soviet bloc would come down heavily on the Third World side.

Another diplomat pointed out that if Mr. M'Bow steps down at the end of his second mandate in 1987, he will be replaced by another African or Asian. "It is unthinkable that a European will again become director-general," he said, adding that because Mr. M'Bow was the first African to become head of any UN agency,

he is thus a symbol of pride and international power for the region.

A former staffer who has become one of Mr. M'Bow's most outspoken critics says that UNESCO members made a "catastrophic" mistake when they elected Mr. M'Bow unanimously twice, in 1974 and again in 1980, because by doing so they told him "UNESCO is yours" and he "took it as a mandate for total power in the African tradition."

But others point out that UNESCO's directors-general have never really been elected. They are chosen by the executive board which, after long negotiation, submits a single name to the general conference for election by acclamation.

In the case of Mr. M'Bow, the Africans had made it known that they felt it was their turn. Mr. M'Bow's name began to circulate and, with backing from some who are now his enemies, he emerged as the only candidate. The United States was one of his backers.

Many Western and neutral diplomats at UNESCO today feel that many, but not all, of the American charges against the director-general have some justification. Many agree that Mr. M'Bow is a poor administrator and that he has been making a systematic effort to reshape the secretariat in his image by easing out veteran European staff members and replacing them with Africans and other Third World persons, often, they charge, without due regard for competence.

He has frequently resorted to temporary appointments of a few months which have then repeatedly been renewed without the established procedures required for the usual two-year contracts.

European diplomats share the U.S. complaint about lack of "transparency" in the secretariat's budget operations. They regret the procedures that give neither the general conference nor the executive council a chance to find out how money allocated to a program is actually spent. But these procedures existed long before Mr. M'Bow's arrival.

Four experts of the U.S. General Accounting office began an investigation of UNESCO's

UNESCO to Begin a Debate On Shaping Its Future Role

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just before the deadline set by the United States for its withdrawal.

Mr. M'Bow, 63, has stated that he has no intention of resigning but will remain in office at least until his second term expires at the end of 1987. Although no member government has called for his resignation, it has been suggested by some Western papers that relations between him and Washington are beyond repair.

Also on the agenda is a letter to Mr. M'Bow from the British government echoing the American position in a gentler way. Britain, the letter says, has decided to stay in UNESCO "for the time being" but is insisting on "dramatic improvements."

The Soviet delegation, though not endorsing the American charges, has publicly agreed that major reforms in UNESCO are urgently needed. But the Russians are likely to attack the U.S. decision as a move to destroy the universality of UNESCO and of the United Nations system as a whole.

The Russians are the second largest contributors to the UNESCO budget, with 10.41 percent. Like the Americans, they wanted the budget to be reduced.

The 65-page State Department policy review, on which the Reagan administration has based its decision to withdraw, contains high praise for the organization's practical achievements in science and education, giving it credit for playing a highly effective and in some instances "unique" role. At the same time, the document contains scathing attacks on UNESCO's activities in the political and ideological realm.

Most of the West's suggestions that will be submitted to the board are demands to cut down on the ideological theorizing.

budgetary and accounting practices in early April and will make their report in the fall.

While talking about waste and poor financial management, no one in an official capacity has suggested any personal dishonesty on the part of the director-general, one ambassador noted.

Some ambassadors have found the change of style from Mr. Maheu's French intellectualism to Mr. M'Bow's African passion hard to swallow.

"They [the Africans] come out with these resolutions of fulsome flowery praise describing him as a beacon of light in a dark world, and you go along because things here are done by consensus. I would feel sorry to gripe and oppose the phrasing; but I tell you, sometimes it sticks in my throat," said one Western delegate. He said that he thinks UNESCO, faults and all, is a good thing and that the U.S. notice of withdrawal was basically a political decision by the Reagan administration.

Many diplomats describe Mr. M'Bow as highly intelligent and an "excellent political operator," but also as irascible, unduly sensitive to criticism and often high-handed and awkward in his dealings with others. But, one source said, "He can also show great charm."

"He has an almost paranoid obsession about secrecy" said another. In a recent meeting with some ambassadors, Mr. M'Bow threatened to take disciplinary action against secretariat members found to be giving information to delegations, prompting one enraged envoy to wonder "what secrets" the director-general could have to hide since the secretariat was supposed to be responsible to the member states.

Several delegates said that Mr. M'Bow sees himself as the "personal incarnation of UNESCO" and demands the corresponding regal treatment, as did René Maheu of whom Richard Hoggart, a former British assistant director-general, wrote that "from the first day he was intent on merging his identity with that of UNESCO."

Reagan administration officials, including Mrs. Gerard, tend to see Mr. M'Bow as a radical Third World militant and a pro-Soviet Marxist

The Scandinavians, for instance, who take a more lenient view of UNESCO than some other Western nations, want it to scrap altogether its First Major Program entitled "Reflection on World Problems and Future Oriented Studies."

But Mr. M'Bow said recently that he had great hopes that this program will "provide a think tank for the international community's forward thinking" and that he has plans for the creation of a "network of analysis and research centers in all the regions" of the world.

Like Mr. M'Bow, the overwhelming majority of Third World countries are certain to resist what they see as Western attempts to rob UNESCO of its political and ideological role and reduce it to a development agency.

Members of a so-called Western group, which includes Japan, drafted a document several weeks ago attempting to define UNESCO's shortcomings and suggest possible ways to improve it.

But, significantly, because of the divergent views within the group, the document was kept in the form of an outline rather than a formally agreed position or a set of demands. Its general thrust was supported by a majority of countries in the group, but individual governments for differing reasons took issue with some of its points and its phrasing.

The document has served as a working paper for seven subcommittees in the Western working group, each dealing with a specific issue such as UNESCO's structure, human rights or the flow of information.

Many of the suggestions that will be put before the board have come out of these groups. But because of the diversity of views, there are not likely to be any joint Western draft resolutions except on issues concerning administration, personnel and housekeeping.

ideologue who is helping Moscow propagate its ideological goals through UNESCO.

Few Western diplomats are willing to go that far.

Most speak of him as a moderate African nationalist who is neither pro- nor anti-Soviet but who, "like most Africans, deplores East-West confrontation as something that can only hurt them."

If Mr. M'Bow is a Marxist at all, his Marxism is of the vague, anti-colonialist African brand that has little or nothing to do with Soviet communism, many diplomats and other close observers of UNESCO say.

They argue that his frequent exhortations that individuals and institutions, such as the press, must serve the higher interests of society are a concept common to the new nations and fundamentally different from the "statism" of the Soviet bloc.

The French are part of this school of thought. They have a long tradition of turning the elite of their colonies, and later their former colonies, into French leftist intellectuals who are at home in French universities and in the cafes of Saint Germain des Prés.

"M'Bow has all the traits of a French intellectual; when he has found the right word to describe a situation, he thinks he has solved the problem," a non-Gallic diplomat said with Gallic irony.

Some Europeans are concerned that U.S. attempts to put a pro-Soviet stamp on Mr. M'Bow may become a self-fulfilling prophecy by driving him closer to Moscow than he ever wanted to be.

Mr. M'Bow's greatest single error in Western eyes has been his militant advocacy of a New World Information and Communication Order which called for the licensing of journalists and could be evoked by member governments as a justification of censorship.

Mr. M'Bow is seen as the driving spirit behind this proposal and is finding few Western defenders on this score.

The stated purpose of the new information order is to correct the imbalance between the industrial Western world and the newly developed nations in the gathering and dissemination of news. Third World countries charge that Western news organizations have a virtual monopoly everywhere in the world, including Africa and Asia.

The West concedes the existence of this imbalance and has declared itself ready to help correct it through increased technology transfer, training programs and scholarships. But it opposes Third World and Soviet proposals for solving the problem by regulations that would severely restrict the freedom of the press.

The battle has been going on for 10 years and will continue. The last UNESCO General Conference late last year retreated from some positions that were seen as threats to the freedom of the press but let others stand.

Most Western diplomats and journalists see the retreat as tactical and predict that attacks on press freedom will be renewed. Mr. M'Bow clearly will remain a key figure in this contest.

Western delegations are angry also over Mr. M'Bow's successful drive to have the next general conference, in 1985, meet in Sofia.

Mr. M'Bow "has a thing about Bulgaria," a delegate commented, adding that the director-general has spent his vacations there for the last several years and has chosen a Bulgarian historian as editor of the five-volume contemporary world history that UNESCO has commissioned.

All these moves are seen by some in the West as examples of Mr. M'Bow's role in accelerating the politicization of UNESCO.

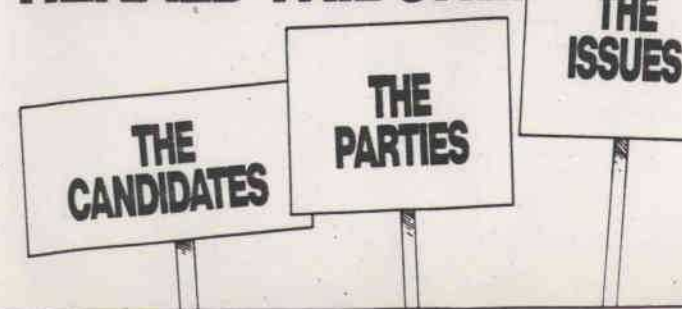
Last fall, when Mr. M'Bow surprisingly swung the African vote behind Mongolia in a contest with Sri Lanka for a seat on the executive board, some delegates denounced it privately as a blatantly pro-Soviet move.

But then he used his African constituency just as surprisingly to prevent the election of the Indian candidate, T.N. Kaul, to the presidency of the board. Mr. Kaul, a former Indian ambassador to Moscow and the United Nations, had the backing of the Soviet Union and was opposed by the West. His election had been taken for granted. Instead the presidency went to Patrick Seddoh of Ghana, a candidate acceptable to the West.



Amadou Mahtar M'Bow, above, the director-general of UNESCO, is the first African to head a UN agency. He was preceded in office by Julian Huxley, above right, a British scientist, and René Maheu, lower right, a French professor.

FOLLOW THE AMERICAN POLITICAL CAMPAIGN DAY AFTER DAY IN THE INTERNATIONAL HERALD TRIBUNE.



—HENRY TANNER