

INTERVIEW

FEDERICO MAYOR ZARAGOZA DIRECTOR-GENERAL OF UNESCO



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—What are the main concerns in the world of culture today?

—*There are many aspects of international culture that concern us today. For example, there's the enormous risk of the conventionality of culture, of a symbolism which ends up having nothing at all to do with reality. But there's one question that concerns us more than anything: the possibility of a growing uniformity. The risk that identity, diversity and cultural complexity might gradually disappear.*

—Is this tendency towards uniformity a result of the new world situation in technology?

—*Yes, basically it's a result of the audiovisual media and, in particular, television, which is causing an invasion of particular ways of life, particular ideological perceptions belonging to cultures that are gradually taking over: how we live, how we dance, what music we listen to, what we cook, what we wear... in a word, everything that goes to make up a people's cultural identity. Cultures are becoming more and more uniform, but nothing is being imposed, unlike situations that have existed at particular moments; there are very recent examples of the imposition of a particular political system that had as one of its objectives the uniformity of its citizens. At present, our window to the exterior is almost exclusively the television screen, and we fall into a passive attitude, rather than one of dialogue that could result, for example, from reading. I believe that this progressive implantation of lifestyles, of ways of eating, of behaving, reacting, this threat to diversity, is surely culture's basic concern.*

—Who's responsible for the defence of diversity? Should it be the state, international organizations, UNESCO?

—*I think that UNESCO, in collaboration with non-government and intergovernmental organizations and others, should lay down the principal guidelines, which can be a result of previous experiences in different parts of the world. But what happens within each state depends on public pressure. The first thing that's needed, then, is for the public to realize the importance of a proper, planned and balanced defence of its culture.*

—At present there's talk about what the role of the state should be in the question of culture: to what extent it should intervene, and whether too much state in-



tervention destroys cultural creativity. What's the best solution?

—*It's very difficult: in this field the distinction between encouragement and inducement is a delicate one to draw. The*

same thing happens with UNESCO. We're now celebrating the International Decennium of Cultural Development, and I'm worried about taking too many initiatives and being told that in the end we're imposing ourselves as well, instead of allowing initiatives on the part of individuals, groups, associations, different countries or enterprises from more than one country on a regional or world scale.

—And within each country, what should be the role of the state?

—*As discreet as possible. Not only in this respect, but in everything. I mean, the state should aim at being a basis for collection and projection. In fact, a minister of culture, who with the best faith in the world gives a special boost to a certain sector or a certain initiative, can immediately be accused of wanting to direct culture, even if that isn't his intention. What is true is that the promotion of culture also has to be the promotion of an inviolable freedom. Creativity is difficult to actually laill, though it may after die of stagnation or starvation. One of the things that can destroy creativity is if the state defines certain areas of priority, and as a result, others, that could have perfectly spontaneous, valid, even brilliant contributions to make, become dangerously weakened in comparison with those that are being encouraged.*

—In the case of cultures without a state of their own —Catalan culture for example, a culture within a state that has several cultures—, how does UNESCO view their future?

—*I think the situation is quite clear. Evidently the cultural map of the world very often has nothing to do with geopolitical borders. And what interests us is the promotion of diversity, of pluralism, to see that every culture, every race, makes its contribution felt.*

—How can one protect these cultures that have no state structures of their own?

—*They're the ones that are most in need of protection, precisely through international co-operation. As UNESCO, that's to say, the organization that has to watch over the development of culture, it would be inadmissible if we only recognized the existence of decision-making mechanisms at state level. We have to provide general guidelines and strategies that are applicable everywhere, and that are based on freedom and on the encou-*

agement of creativity, not on intervention or administration, on the defence of diversity and pluralism in the face of the tendency toward uniformity. That's what we have to defend, and we defend it for all cultures, regardless of whether or not they have their own corresponding state.

—But with what mechanisms?

—By virtue of the fact that UNESCO is an international organism, our mechanisms have to include the government, because we're an intergovernmental organization. But I think this point, which could be the weak point, is in fact our strength, as is so often the case. I often quote a poem of Hölderlin's I'm very fond of, that says that where there's mortal danger there's often salvation. In this case, the possible danger, the risk of a state's not wanting to support the culture of one of the races that go to make it up, comes up against the fact that, with its membership of 156 countries and associated governments, UNESCO reduces the possibilities of any state's being publicly accused of carrying out a state culture or of showing a bias as regards the cultures of its different peoples. For that reason, as in the case of human rights, although UNESCO isn't a tribunal and can't pass any kind of sentence or judgement, our associate organizations can be the channel for any country's declarations regarding the violation of human rights in another country. Because of this, countries avoid having these situations dealt with in the international forum. So I think that international cooperation itself provides the basis for the promotion of those cultures that have no direct state representation, within a system of civil liberties. Because, let's be honest, there are peoples whose culture is practically unitary, but not represented by the state, which is in the hands of a group that thinks differently from the rest of the inhabitants. But even so, they avoid any international «display» of regressive policies, cultural policy included.

—How does it feel to be a Director-General of UNESCO with a Catalan cultural background? How has your belonging to Catalan culture contributed?

—I think it's been very important. The fact that UNESCO today has a Director-General whose mother tongue is not the same as the official language of the state that represents him is important. I've often said that, as a Spaniard, I see things in a particular way, and that as a Catalan, I add other ways of seeing. And it's good



that these things should come out. It's good because in today's world there's no chance of developing unless we bear in mind not only diversity, but also the uniqueness of each individual.

—Hasn't it ever been a burden having to admit that you come from a small culture?

—On the contrary. First, because it isn't small. It's an immense culture, a culture that's projected all over the world. Also, Catalan culture has always been an open culture. To deny that would be a mistake, a mistake without any basis in reality. Precisely what I admire about Catalan culture is that it's always been a sea-going culture. It's always been open. It's never tended toward conventionalism or introspection. The values of our Catalan culture are being spread right round the world and, in my opinion, in the best possible way. This is being done without at any moment failing to respect the fact of belonging to a state, the Spanish state. And this in fact enriches the state itself, that is, everything Catalonia does, everything Catalonia projects, helps the Spanish state to attain a greater vision and a greater creativity. I think Catalan culture in general has one important characteristic, and that's its capacity for very elevated ideas, on the one hand, while on the other hand remaining in touch with its immediate environment. It's a question of finding the balance between the steps we have to take towards what today is an impossible ideal, which may become possible tomorrow, and the knowledge that we have to advance slowly, through our day-to-day actions. This ability to press forward day by day towards a goal which is in fact a long way off, which might at times seem utopian, is one of the Catalans' most significant characteristics.

—There's a lot of talk today about whether the scientific and technological culture we're immersed in can be dehumanizing, or whether, on the contrary, it could provide the basis for a new humanism. What are your feelings on the subject?

—I'm a great believer in knowledge. That's to say, I think that knowledge is always positive, that we need to increase our knowledge all the time, that knowledge has done us a lot of good, and that, generally speaking, mankind today is more just than it was some years ago.

—But at present there's more science and technology than there is philosophy, for example.

—No. I don't think that's true. Anyway, one thing has nothing to do with the other. Amongst other reasons, because philosophy—and very solid philosophy, too—



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has been with us for 2,000 years, or 10,000 or 20,000 years, whereas science as we know it today, especially technology, hasn't. But there's one distinction I must make: one thing is science, the other is the use we make of science.

—How can we make sure that our use of science leads to a more humane society?

—*The application of science can be anti-human, perverse even. But here we have mankind's capacity to control his future. And that's something I always insist on. And that's why I'm optimistic.*

—Does this have to be done in the field of science, or what?

—*No. The scientist has to speak out in favour of knowledge, but the use it's put to could be perverse. Why is it put to bad use? Why is it used perversely? Normally for reasons of national sovereignty and defence, because of violence, or for purely financial interests. That's why we must be able to modify this tendency towards the misuse of knowledge. But on the other hand, I think that science and technology can add to creativity, out-*

landishness, extravagance, the unexpected, creation.

—And where do we find the inspiration to direct the use of science towards the desired end? What sources of inspiration can we look to nowadays?

—*The same ones as ever. Our sources of inspiration can only be the ethic principles of solidarity, peace, justice and freedom: these principles have always been an inspiration and will be our inspiration in the future. Any culture or creation that is based on other objectives is an insubstantial one. I always like to say that the good painter is the one who sells what he paints, not the one who paints what he sells; because if he paints what he sells, it implies a certain mediatization, and this mediatization is nothing new; it isn't only the result of recent technological methods. For this reason I think there's an ethical principle involved.*

—In this respect, can we say that ideologies, religions, have a future in this world, that they have to be taken as points of inspiration, sources of inspiration?

—*Religion, and over and above religion, religious feeling. The eternal struggle between belief and disbelief, the eternal struggle that everybody has, whether he admits it or not, to answer the most intimate questions —where are we going, what's the final solution to the mystery we're living?— that'll never be answered. It'll always be a mystery, because the moment it's solved, the moment the light predominates over the darkness, man will no longer be free. That's to say, the demands of freedom mean that we always have to be in this difficult situation of leaning towards one solution or the other. And it's precisely this tension that leads to creativity.*

—But there seem to be some very negative aspects in contemporary culture: a good dose of nihilism in certain developed countries; a lot of fundamentalism in other places. How do you view this ambiguity?

—*Intolerance in the field of religion is nothing new, and it isn't exclusive to any particular religion. I mean all religions have been through moments of absolutely*



intolerable exarcebation, but I think these have been misinterpretations. In the case of my own religion, what impresses me most is precisely the unexpected nature of the fact that the God-man is born in a stable, and that instead of being a symbol of strength is a symbol of weakness, and dies on the cross. That is, I think fundamentalism is the negation of all this great symbolism of the Catholic religion. And I say that because when someone claims that there are people who are more papist than the pope, it's true; and what that means is that certain principles that make for religious fundamentalism are being exaggerated.

—And as regards nihilism?

—As regards nihilism, I feel that at the present moment there's a rapidly growing acceptance of the need for a system of values and ethical principles. To the extent that, only recently, the report of the Brundtland Commission, the World Commission on Environment and Development, came to the conclusion that today's world needs a global system of ethics. That's why I say that in all honesty

I don't believe there's an important move towards nihilism in the world today. What we do find, in those countries where excessive facilities are sometimes afforded prematurely, is a tendency towards evasion. We're creating an artificial world where a lot of people, especially the young, realize that they aren't being taken into consideration, that everything is being done behind their backs; and then they let themselves get carried away by this great flood of things that are alien to them and their way of thinking. Finally, there's a tendency towards evasion, as well as, let's be honest, an intolerable tendency towards international traffic in the means to this evasion. This is one of the things we have to fight against today. The phenomenon is one of marginalization, of a consumer world. And the first thing we have to do to defend our culture is to realize that, whatever their origin, we must also learn to moderate this consumer society and this subservience to economic interests.

—This is the 40th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Does UNESCO feel that it's active in this

field, on the occasion of this 40th anniversary?

—Yes, because for us, this is fundamental. The main aspect of our constitutional mandate is the defence of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

—Is there anything in particular planned, as regards this anniversary?

—Yes. UNESCO foresees various events and a number of publications to celebrate the 40th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. But what concerns me most is the idea of getting the commemoration of the principles of the Universal Declaration to every school in the world—with this in mind, I've written to all the heads of state, heads of government, and ministers of education, because I think our young people, our children, are the ones who, from the moment they become conscious of what's going on in the world, will have to know that there is a set of general principles, and that these general principles are absolutely fundamental to the dignity of all mankind. ■