

Our Creative Diversity: Report of the World Commission on Culture and Development.. Paris: UNESCO, 1995.

Reviewed by Victor Margolin

“Development divorced from its human or cultural context is development without a soul.”

Our Creative Diversity, 1995

In 1992 the Secretary-General of the United Nations, Boutros Boutros-Ghali, and the Director-General of UNESCO, Federico Mayor, jointly created the World Commission on Culture and Development. Its charge was to rethink the process of development itself, taking into account recent proposals by the United Nations Development Program and other organizations for a broad concept of human well-being as the aim of development to replace the more limited focus on economic progress alone.

The Commission, part of a larger initiative, the World Decade for Culture and Development, which began in 1988 and will end this year, was headed by former United Nations Secretary-General Javier Pérez de Cuéllar and was comprised of fourteen members. No Americans were among them although one member from Great Britain, Keith Griffin, is a professor of economics at the University of California Riverside. Among the honorary members were Derek Walcott and Elie Wiesel, both world-renowned writers and activists who reside in the United States.

The rethinking of the development process which the Commission was charged to undertake had been stimulated within UNESCO by several representatives of the Nordic countries who were inspired by the Bruntland Report on environmental issues, *Our Common Future*, as well as by discussions on the environment that took place at the Rio Summit in 1993. Where the Bruntland Report had alerted the international community to the necessary relation between ecological issues and economic planning, those supporting a Commission on Culture and Development believed that a comparable link between the latter two entities was long overdue.

Our Creative Diversity, the report produced by the Commission, was published in November 1995 and has since circulated widely around the globe and on the World Wide Web. In ten chapters, followed by an International Agenda, it presents a rethinking of the development process that includes a range of new issues such as the rights of women and children, the recognition of indigenous peoples, and the preservation of the world's cultural heritage. The report posits a bold vision of global development that attends to the needs of many cultural groups. It cites anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss's vision of world civilization as “a world-wide coalition of cultures, each of which would preserve its own originality” (29). The argument for the autonomy of multiple cultural voices presents a significant challenge to traditional strategies

of geopolitics and calls for extended discussions and debates on a global scale. It is supported by the report's acknowledgment of more than 10,000 distinct societies in roughly 200 nations.

Because the relation of culture to development is so important and UNESCO is the principal international organization where its discussion is taking place, one finds it unfortunate that the United States was not actively involved with the Commission's work. In fact, the United States has not been a member of UNESCO since 1984. American withdrawal from the organization occurred in December of that year during the administration of Ronald Reagan. It was based on charges of UNESCO's fiscal irresponsibility and lack of respect for the institutions of a free society. The latter complaint was a response to debates within UNESCO about a New World Information and Communication Order, which was perceived by the Reagan administration as a challenge to the basic American tenets of press freedom.

UNESCO's Director-General Amadou-Mahtar M'Bow of Senegal, reluctant to see the United States leave, made earnest attempts to respond to the administration's charges but the U.S. government ignored all opportunities to turn the situation around. The government's withdrawal was part of a larger attempt by the Reagan administration to reduce America's international commitments and revive an isolationist policy that U.S. officials in the postwar years had fought hard to overcome.

Since the United States' departure from UNESCO, no American president has placed a return to the organization high on his political agenda. Perhaps the most positive sign of a change was President Clinton's letter to Director-General Federico Mayor as a contribution to UNESCO's 50th anniversary celebration in Paris in November, 1995. In that letter, the president acknowledged that UNESCO had "taken strides to address the concerns and issues that led to U.S. withdrawal from UNESCO in 1984" and he applauded the organization's contributions to international human rights as well as educational, scientific, and cultural exchange. According to Mr. Clinton, it was primarily budget constraints that prevented the United States from rejoining UNESCO and he assured Director-General Mayor that U.S. membership in the organization remained on his list of priorities for the future.

As welcome as the president's message was and still is, it nonetheless avoided the political implications for the United States of not participating actively in the debates on global development that have been taking place within UNESCO. A further discussion of the World Commission on Culture and Development's report will make clear how much is at stake in fashioning a new agenda for development and how important it is for all nations, including the United States, to be involved in talks on how this agenda should be implemented. There is little in the Commission's report that anyone who follows the changing discourses on gender, heritage, and cultural diversity will find entirely new but the inclusion of these topics in a strategic

document such as this marks, I believe, a significant advance in the definition of global development requirements.

We must, of course, take into account the constraints of an officially appointed commission when producing a report like *Our Creative Diversity* and accept the need to negotiate among competing values for the final result. At the same time we should note that a report issued under the auspices of UNESCO and the United Nations is going to be persuasive at a level of national and international policy as well as individual awareness. Pérez de Cuéller, in his introduction emphasizes the Commission's intention to reach several audiences—world opinion leaders, intellectuals and artists, and the general public.

The strong populist emphasis in *Our Creative Diversity* is very welcome after years of development studies that focused on large-scale public works and infrastructure projects. The Commission members affirm the right of every culture, no matter how small, to participate in the global community. While this vision seems optimistic when placed amidst the difficulties of mutual understanding and tolerance that currently pervade the planet, it nonetheless affirms that all cultures have integrity and all voices are entitled to be heard.

Within the growing literature on globalization, there is a strong critique of the “One World” vision that prescribes for everyone a common model of human conduct, notably one that originated in the West. What the Commission's report recognizes, by contrast, is that any persuasive vision of global society must now acknowledge the cultural differences among peoples and allow for their expression. This, however, can get a bit tricky, particularly in the case of restrictive or repressive practices that are acceptable in specific cultures. The Commission members walk a fine line, for example, when they argue that

The cultural meaning of certain oppressive practices such as female genital mutilation or widow burning or female infanticide must be understood in depth, although this does not prevent the strongest condemnation (134).

The difference here between what is culturally acceptable within a specific group and the standards of other groups and international bodies emphasizes the fact that there is a politics of cultural identity and practice which results frequently in significant tensions. *Our Creative Diversity* has a decidedly liberal slant and the Commission presents many arguments for progressive change but the report does not hit as hard at injustices as do the investigations of non-governmental organizations such as Amnesty International. This is understandable for a document produced under the auspices of the United Nations and UNESCO although the report does manage to bring some specific injustices as well as general ones to light.

In the chapter on gender, the Commission finds unacceptable the paucity of women in governmental and parliamentary positions world-wide as well as the widespread exploitation of

women in the labor force. In particular it condemns the “unscrupulous brokers and middlemen” who profit from the illicit traffic in prostitutes and bar girls. Whereas much of the past literature on development policy has treated all members of a culture as equal beneficiaries of the development process, the Commission notes that women are frequently discriminated against in this process by virtue of reduced access to paid employment, less pay for the same work as men, and other factors. “The fact is,” states the report, “that a number of cultures now invoking traditional laws or religious freedom show more concern with the defence of men’s existing privileges than with the preservation of women’s rights” (133).

The rights of children and young people too are addressed in the report which notes that this group will comprise more than fifty percent of the population in developing countries at the beginning of the next millennium. The Commission’s strongest recommendation to improve their situation is to put compulsory universal primary education above economic growth where children are concerned. This, the report asserts, will provide the foundation for a skilled work force and contribute to the elimination of child labor. The Commission takes the strong position that “respect for different cultures should not be used to deny children their basic human rights in the name of cultural diversity” (156).

The report’s stance on the role of media in development is perhaps the trickiest to maneuver because it addresses the imbalance of media control that prevents many of the cultural voices deemed important by the Commission from being heard. Where other indictments against injustice are more specific, the report exposes the global media imbalance in only the most general terms.

Many people still remain voiceless or unheard. Control of some of the most powerful new media tools is still concentrated in the hands of a few, whether nationally or internationally, in private or public ownership or under governmental monopoly. Such dominance raises the spectre of cultural hegemony: a fear of “homogenization” is widespread and widely expressed (106).

What is not mentioned specifically here is the power of private media companies, especially those in the United States, to dominate the content of programs that are broadcast around the world. The Commission has no simple solution to helping the “have-nots of the information revolution,” although it does link deficiencies of national infrastructures such as the lack of electricity in thousands of communities to the communication disadvantages of those communities’ inhabitants.

Although the report takes on numerous hard-to-resolve issues like the unequal distribution of media control, the oppression of women, and the injustices of child labor, it also puts forth many suggestions for change that are easier to implement. One area of concern is the

preservation of cultural heritage by documenting languages, developing archives, and sustaining handicrafts. The report highlights the need for conservationists, librarians, and curators to create archives and exhibitions to preserve and commemorate the world's many cultural groups. These efforts, it argues, should be incorporated into "larger concerted heritage policies," a goal of UNESCO's "Memory of the World" program which was launched in 1992.

The report also urges more government support for non-market initiatives in all parts of the world to counter the tendency of commercial enterprise to shape tastes in food, fashion, music, and media. In this regard, the arts have a particularly strong contribution to make. To oppose tendencies towards cultural homogenization, the report calls as well for nations to recognize diversity by creating "[a] multi-ethnic policy, a multi-language policy, a policy representing different religious points of view" (234).

Our Creative Diversity concludes with a ten-item action agenda whose primary objective is to sustain a continuing public forum on culture and development. As with many reports of this type, research is high on the list of things to be done. The authors recommend the preparation of an Annual Report on Culture and Development, closer cooperation between UNESCO and other United Agencies, and the creation of an inventory of cultural rights that are not protected by existing international laws. Particularly thorny is the problem of media violence and pornography whose discussion the Commission defers to an international forum of the future.

Most radical of the Commission's recommendations, however, is its call for a World People's Assembly, modeled on the European Parliament, whose members would be directly elected by ordinary citizens around the world. As the Commission argues: "Not only development strategies should become people-centred: so should all institutions of global governance" (286).

This recommendation is a grand conclusion to a document which alternates the highest aspirations to human justice and welfare with a sense of reality that exposes the obstacles to their achievement. Rather than simply end with a call for more research and future conferences to perpetuate the cycle of discourse divorced from action, the Commission presents a challenging proposal that may well be taken up by more than one non-governmental organization or citizen's group in the years to come. The report rightly recognizes the growing power of such groups as new forms of communication like the Internet make regular contact over large distances easy and cheap.

The Clinton administration, like others before it, has been able to downplay the issue of rejoining UNESCO because the American public has little sense of what not belonging to this organization implies. *Our Common Diversity* makes it clear that global development policy is being rethought without our official participation, a fact that contributes to the progressive erosion of American leadership in global affairs. While the United States continues to wield power in the economic and military spheres, our image as a nation concerned with human welfare on a global

scale is sadly tarnished. It is not just our lack of participation in UNESCO that has caused this but also the extreme cutbacks in foreign aid, the low profile accorded to international educational and cultural affairs within the government, and the reduced impact of the Peace Corps.

Hillary Clinton's concern for the children of the world has been articulated far more forcefully by the World Commission on Culture and Development. How much more impressive her own engagement with these issues would be if it were part of a larger international effort and how much weaker it becomes when one recognizes that the United States government does not even participate in the most important debates on global development where such issues are foregrounded.

The scope of the problems addressed in the *Our Creative Diversity* and the cogency of the report's call for remedies to global injustice should make clear how important it is for the United States to be involved in such efforts as the World Commission on Culture and Development. But, as Pérez de Cuéller said, governments are only one audience for its report. *Our Creative Diversity* can serve as an excellent guide for anyone who wants to improve their understanding of culture's role in the development process.

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