

Making a difference

Explorations of the history of UNESCO

Poul Duedahl (Associate Professor, Department of History, Aalborg University, Denmark)

Documents can make a difference.

The English statesman and philosopher Francis Bacon even characterized documents as one of the phenomena – especially after the invention of the printing press – which had changed the world most fundamentally. The point is that documents can move information from place to place and over long distances without the author having to be physically present, and that documents can reach large audiences and influence lives by introducing new ideas, norms, laws and regulations.

The founders of the United Nations were well aware of the power of the written word. In wake of the Nazi violence during World War II they not only recognized the need for a direct and immediate military and economical contribution to peace, but also laid stress on the indirect and long-term but indispensable contribution of documents – documents whose content could change hostile attitudes and politically loaded stereotypes by offering information countering the existing belief system and offering new and meaningful, common ground for thinking, describing and acting. Carrying out such a piece of mental engineering was the basic idea behind the foundation of UNESCO – the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization – in November 1945.

But documents have at least one other feature, which often proves useful to historians: they can store information, even long after the authors have left this world. That is why we have archives. During my research on the history of UNESCO, I have had the pleasure of visiting a few of them, and in this paper I will share my experience with finding and using documents and I will give an impression of the methodological problems I have met along the way – the overall problem being to find a way to measure the exact impact of UNESCO's ideas and initiatives. Or in other words: to determine to what extent this particular international organization even made a difference!

Race to the finish

When I initiated my studies in the history of UNESCO, what basically interested me was the question of as to whether or how the organization had contributed to peace in the first 20 years of its existence.

In 2005 I paid the first visit to the UNESCO Archives in Paris. At first sight a wonderland for a historian, with a few hundred books and boxes, but confronted with an additional basement with thousands of more boxes and documents, I had to take a deep breath – and a decision of where to begin and where to end.

The lack of a large authoritative work on the history of the organization did not make the task any easier, but various articles and printed sources had brought me the impression that it was far from all kinds of knowledge in the 1940's and 1950's that were considered beneficial to the maintenance of peace. This was clearly expressed by the organization's first Director-General, Julian S. Huxley, in his philosophical manifesto for the organization, in which he identified what he called "scientific world humanism" as the organization's overarching principle. According to Huxley, some scientific disciplines were – in the light of the Holocaust and colonialism – more likely to dismantle the idea of inequality and promote equality than others and should therefore be given higher priority as a road to peace in the post-war period. At the forefront were the social sciences, whose practitioners had been active in criticizing racism before and during World War II. Huxley knew they mastered the arguments that could be used in the organization's combat against human inequality since as a biologist he had himself already done his own studies on race in the 1930's and believed that, by promoting such views, they would trickle down through the educational system almost by themselves.¹

I began to examine UNESCO's role in the promotion of the social sciences by looking in the archives of UNESCO's Department of Social Sciences and at its publications. The hope was that they would give me a glimpse of why the social sciences had come to play a more important role in the national educational systems in the West after World War II. It soon stood clear to me that UNESCO had indeed played an active role in that process. For instance, the organization had founded a number of world-wide associations in the fields of economics, law, political science and sociology to encourage these disciplines and make them to work in accordance with the ethical standards of the UN system. The associations were supported economically and their members often invited to carry out projects or

¹ Julian S. Huxley, *UNESCO: Its Purpose and its Philosophy* (London: Preparatory Commission for UNESCO, 1946), p. 8; Julian S. Huxley and A.C. Haddon, *We Europeans: A Survey of "Racial" Problems* (London: J. Cape, 1935).

serve as advisors for the UN system. UNESCO also supported their internationalization by publishing a number of international bibliographies, launching new international journals, establishing common guidelines for the use of concepts, theories and methods, and by contributing financially to the establishment of new social science university studies. The importance of the social sciences was also reflected when UNESCO adopted its first official program in 1950. “No attempts to better the lot of man can meet with success unless they take account of his environment”, it proclaimed. “UNESCO must therefore place social sciences in the foreground of its field of study”.²

The next task was to locate a particular piece of mental engineering that could be used as a fair indication of whether or not the organization’s initiatives had an impact outside of the UNESCO House in the 1950s and 1960s and thus contributed to peace.

Racism was – as indicted by Huxley – clearly an important issue in wake of the Holocaust and colonialism, and UNESCO’s preamble specifically mentioned “the doctrine of the inequality of men and races” as one of the problems the organization had to combat. According to a couple of articles and several documents indicated that the sense that racism posed a potential danger and might come to dominate as a doctrine in some countries prepared the ground for an important UNESCO project relating to racism and international relations.³ That made the choice relatively easy – and brought the number of boxes down to about 20-25.

And the content? Well, in March 1948 the UN Social and Economic Council, ECOSOC, which was working on the design of the Universal Declaration on Human Rights, appointed the former Swedish Trade Minister Gunnar Myrdal – author of *An American Dilemma* – as Executive Secretary of ECE, which was responsible for the daily management of ECOSOC’s work in Europe. In his groundbreaking book Myrdal had called for an “educational offensive” to reduce the gap between public opinion and social science in the whole area of race relations. It might be a coincidence, but one month after his appointment, ECOSOC adopted a resolution on the Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities in Europe, which recommended that UNESCO launched “a program of disseminating scientific facts designed to remove what is commonly known as racial prejudice.”⁴

² *The Basic Programme: UNESCO and its Programme*, 2 vols., Vol. 2 (Paris: UNESCO, 1951), p. 7.

³ *Constitution of the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization: Adopted in London on 16 November 1945*.

⁴ ECOSOC, 6th Session, April 1948, Resolution 116 (VI) B, UN Archives, New York and letter from Henri Laugier (Department of Social Affairs, UN) to Julian Huxley (Director General, UNESCO) 20.4.1948, 323.1 (Statement on Race), UNESCO Archives, Paris.

A few months later, on 10 December 1948, the UN human rights declaration was adopted, while the Brazilian ethnographer Arthur Ramos – an outspoken critic of racial inequality in South America – was approved as head of UNESCO’s Department of Social Sciences, with special responsibility for its new race project – the project which became the cornerstone for my initial research.

The basis of the new project was a memorandum on preliminary research carried out by UN researchers on the basis of works by scientists like Julian Huxley, Otto Klineberg and Gunnar Myrdal – all of whom had described racial hierarchies as social constructs. “Contemporary science does not admit the concept of race as meaning a division of mankind into different parts, each of them characterized by a complex of special traits, both physical and mental. Anthropology has failed clearly to establish such a concept”, the memo concluded.⁵

In accordance to this memo Ramos formulated the details, and at UNESCO’s fourth General Conference in September 1949 the member states agreed upon three goals: a) to study and collect scientific materials concerning questions of race, b) to give wide diffusion to the scientific information collected and c) to prepare an educational campaign based on this information.⁶

Ramos immediately began designing the paper that would form the basis for a statement endorsed by scientific authorities from around the world. The initial steps were taken in close co-operation with the United Nation’s Human Rights Division and in the spirit of its preceding memorandum by claiming that racial hierarchies were a social construct and that the consequences of racial inequality were profound not only in human but also in economic terms.⁷

To adjust and approve a globally agreed statement of this kind, Ramos invited a team of ten scientists all of whom were recruited from the marginal group of anthropologists, psychologists, sociologists and ethnographers who perceived the race concept primarily as a social construct. Most of these had at some point either been affiliated with the scientifically marginalized groups of cultural anthropologists, that were mostly students of Professor Franz Boas at Columbia University in New York, or had carried out studies in South America, where certain countries were often cited as examples of how people of all kinds could live peacefully together. Among them was Claude Lévi-

⁵ “The Main Types and Causes of Discrimination (memorandum submitted by the Secretary-General), released 7.6.1949”, 323.1 (Statement on Race), UNESCO Archives, Paris.

⁶ *Records of the General Conference of the United Nations Educational and Cultural Organization, Fourth Session, Resolutions* (Paris: UNESCO, 1949), p. 22, UNESCO Archives, Paris.

⁷ “Activities of UNESCO” [29.10.1949], 323.1 (Statement on Race), UNESCO Archives, Paris.

Strauss, the French ethnographer from Musée de l'Homme in Paris, Edward Franklin Frazier, the American sociologist from Howard University in Washington, and Ashley Montagu, professor of anthropology from Rutgers University. Montagu was already widely known in the US at the time as an outspoken critic of racial inequality. A physical anthropologist by training, he was now invited to represent biological views on the concept of race alongside the Spanish-Mexican professor of anthropology, Juan Comas – also a prominent critic of racial hierarchies. Altogether these men were expected by UNESCO to come up with a global scientific consensus on race.

In 1950 the final version was complete. It began by stating that all people belonged to the same biological species. There were indeed several different groups with distinct physical characteristics, but the differences between them were small and insignificant in the context of the overall similarities. From a biological point of view one could therefore consider a “race” – Montagu added the quotation marks – as a population characterized by certain overlapping features that were associated with the frequency and distribution of hereditary facilities and were a result of geographical or cultural isolation. These differences and their role were often over-estimated and seen as more fundamental than was the case, so that national, cultural, religious, geographic and linguistic groups had been called “races” on false premises. As a result the idea of racial superiority was unscientific, and the statement recommended that the race concept was replaced by the culturally-rooted concept of “ethnic group”. This concept made more sense scientifically, because people gravitated into marriage and procreation on the basis of cultural similarities and subjective feelings of belonging to the same culture, which were crucial for the spread of individual genes. This meant that culture steered human biology and not vice versa.⁸

The statement on race was undeniably an intellectual landmark, and UNESCO estimated that the arguments legitimizing racial prejudice and racial discrimination would collapse and disappear by themselves as the news spread.

But did the statement – as well as the three additional statements on race of the following years – in fact have an impact?

Answering that question on the basis of the archival holdings in Paris proved to be impossible. The archives contain a quantity of documents on the formulation of the four statements or guidelines of how to think and what to do. The long series of papers also tell of the often difficult task of reaching

⁸ “Statement on Race. Paris, July 1950”, *Four Statements on the Race Problem*. Paris: UNESCO (1969), pp. 30-35.

agreement among scholars from all over the world in the formulation of the statements. But what if the statements never reached an audience outside of the UNESCO House?

I tried to determine the number of times the first statement was mentioned in the press to use that as an indication of UNESCO's influence. An inventory of the press clippings that UNESCO managed to collect in the year 1950 showed that it was mentioned in 133 news articles, 62 in-depth articles and leaders, and in eight major news reports from all over the world. The text was also reproduced in full in three magazines, and it was estimated that there were an additional 50-75 articles that UNESCO staff had not yet tracked. In addition, there was some radio publicity and the distribution of the thousands of copies of the statement itself.⁹

But what if nobody noticed them? I was on the verge of giving up, and – as many historians before me – characterize my research as so-called “intellectual history”, where the focus is the ideas themselves and not their impact.

I decided, however, to go a step further and see if it would be possible to follow the UNESCO statements and analyze their reception as a way to measure their impact. The idea was to pay a visit to the national archives of various member states to get an impression of how the UNESCO national commissions and the national ministries had handled documents received from the organization. Being an extremely expensive method – in terms of both time and money – I began in the country, where my research for obvious reasons would be cheapest to carry out: Denmark. Then I could move on to other member states if a generous donator should turn up.

Visiting the National Archives in Copenhagen was an eye-opener for several reasons. First of all I found an enormous amount of documents in relation to UNESCO. The archives of the Danish UNESCO National Commission alone include more than a thousand boxes. Add to that the documents of the Danish Ministry of Education and Ministry of Culture not to mention the long list of archives related to individuals that had been in touch with UNESCO at some point of their professional career. Luckily, the archives of the Danish UNESCO National Commission included an index that made it relatively easy to find the relevant material concerning the reception of the UNESCO statements.

⁹ “The Myth of Race”, *The New York Times*, 19.7.1950; “All Human Beings”, *Time* 31.7.1950, p. 34; Letter from Douglas H. Schneider (Director, Department of Mass Communication, UNESCO) to Alva Myrdal (Director, Department of Social Sciences, UNESCO) 16.10.1950, and letter from Douglas H. Schneider to Max McCullough (UNESCO Relations Staff, US Department of State) 4.1.1951, 323.12 A 102 (Statement on Race), UNESCO Archives, Paris.

The national commission seemed to have been working efficiently right from the beginning, the organization was indeed popular in the aftermath of the war, and the documents indicated that the commission members did not have many problems convincing politicians and educational boards to use the statements and other material issued by UNESCO. Experimental education with the use of UNESCO's publications was initiated in Danish high schools, the promotion of international understanding soon became official Danish education policy, and with economical support from UNESCO textbooks and teaching methods were improved due to guidelines from the organizations – also to incorporate the latest possible information about race.

Such improvements could be important in that they could encourage a reversal of certain negative images that were traditionally prevalent among Danes about other peoples such as Africans, Jews and Greenlanders. But the documents showed another interesting thing: that the reception of the UNESCO statements on race was largely determined by the Danes' self-image, and in the 1950's and 1960's did not conceive of themselves as racists. Rather the opposite. Danish politicians saw Denmark as an image of "the good colonizer" and as the country that had saved the lives of hundreds of Jews in August 1943. In other words: the statements did indeed have an impact of school textbooks, but the content was most likely to have been considered irrelevant to Danes as was it only targeting problems in the US, UK and South Africa.¹⁰

In wake of my PhD dissertation on UNESCO and race a generous donator suddenly turned up. The Danish Ministry of Science financed the continuation of my studies in the US, where I visited the National Archives, the Library of Congress, the National Anthropological Archives and a couple of presidential libraries to get an impression of the impact of UNESCO's statements on race there.

The reception turned out to be rather different in the US, but the pattern the same: the reception was determined by the self-image of the member states and by the context in which the statements appeared. In the U.S., unlike in Denmark, they became part of an already existing debate about race and racism, and that is one of many reasons why UNESCO was highly unpopular in certain circles. The US sentiment towards UNESCO became even hostile when Dwight D. Eisenhower came to power in

¹⁰ Poul Duedahl: *Fra overmenneske til UNESCO-menneske. En begrebshistorisk analyse af overgangen fra et biologisk til et kulturelt forankret menneskesyn i det 20. århundrede* [From SUPERman to UNESCMan: A conceptual and historical analysis of the transition from a biological to a cultural view of man in the 20th Century] [Unpublished Ph.D. Dissertation, Aalborg University, Denmark, 2007], p. 340.

1953 and saw it as an organization that harbored communistic ideas. Anybody working on human rights therefore risked being labeled a Communist and thereby being politically ostracized.

Some anthropologists and human rights activists of the 1950s and 1960s on the other hand saw the involvement of this international organization as an opportunity, one of them being the renowned American civil rights activist Jesse Jackson. “UNESCO came out with a study,” he recalls, “that said that blacks – at that time Negroes – were not inferior, and there was no fundamental genetic difference between blacks and whites. We were determined in our differences by social conditions.” And he continues: “We went around the South giving speeches, holding up the UNESCO study, saying that blacks were not inferior. A world body had studied and concluded that we were not inferior. It was a big deal. UNESCO, a world body – not some Southern segregated school, not some Southern governor, not even the President – UNESCO said we were not inferior.”¹¹

So the statements did have an impact, and they were even referred to during the famous Supreme Court case of *Brown vs. Board of Education* of May 1954, which settled the question as to whether segregation was a form of discrimination that was prohibited by law. Here UNESCO’s work was referred to by the defence as the newest available scientific evidence.¹² Furthermore, the US Supreme Court drew heavily upon the statements in its landmark decision of 1967 to declare those laws unconstitutional that prohibited mixed-race marriages in some states, because the statements specifically said that racial intermixture posed no danger and that there was no biological reason to ban interracial marriages.¹³

“The revolution was now complete,” as the historians John P. Jackson, Jr., and Nadine Weidman claim.¹⁴ Or was UNESCO’s race project – as has been proposed by another historian, Michelle Brattain – on the contrary a short-lived and even ineffective project that proved a failure in reshaping ideas

¹¹ “Strategies and Tactics in the Struggle for Civil and Human Rights with Reverend Jesse Jackson”, 18.11.2002, p. 2, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library & Museum, Boston, MA.

¹² Thurgood Marshall, “The Great Test of ‘Civil Rights’”, *UNESCO Courier*, 1954, 6:21-22; Papers of the NAACP, part 3: The Campaign for Educational Equality. Series C: Legal Department and Central Office records, 1951-55, Manuscripts Division, Library of Congress, Washington DC.

¹³ *Loving v. Virginia: Brief of Amici Curiae*: 388 US 1 (1967), US Supreme Court Records and Briefs, p. 28, Library of Congress, Washington DC.

¹⁴ John P. Jackson, Jr. and Nadine M. Weidman, *Race, Racism and Science: Social Impact and Interaction* (London: Rutgers University Press, 2006), p. 201.

about race – at least in the US?¹⁵ The two extremes show how difficult it is to determine the real extent of UNESCO's impact, as the outcome depends very much on what you measure.

Did UNESCO's statements on race in fact come to play a role in US politics? Yes, they did. But did the content of the statements become known to a wider range of people – did they cause a change in mentality or a new view of man? Most probably not – at least not in the short run and any changes can hardly be attributed solely to UNESCO.

In other words: The overall methodological problem for me was – and still is – to determine the exact impact of UNESCO's initiatives by. A useful study design needs to be formulated and that will require careful consideration of how to measure the precise effect of UNESCO's work. Hopefully that will soon be possible and what a difference that would make!

Selling mankind

It does not make much sense to remove a certain concept without offering an alternative. For the authors of the race statements that concept was the notion of “ethnic group”, but it really did not catch people's attention in the 1950's and 1960's. So, in wake of my studies of UNESCO and race, it was obvious to look at another central concept promoted by the UN system: “mankind”.

I focused on one of many projects promoting the notion of mankind: UNESCO's History of Mankind project. The project was chosen because it was highly prestigious for historians to be associated with in the 1950's and 1960's and a lot of time and money were spent on it. But the project also proved to be interesting for me because the documents gave me an impression of how UNESCO worked and how complicated it could sometimes be to get from the launch of an idea to its execution. In this case, the “right interpretation” of history proved to be a major battle field under the influence of external events and political differences at the time but also – once again – the self-image of the different member states. The disagreements eventually caused severe delays of most of the volumes and made the entire process so slow and inefficient that it hardly made sense to me to examine the impact separately. One might argue that I should have left it there and chosen another project to focus on, but I think inefficiency and lack of impact is also a part of the history of international organizations.

First, let me introduce the History of Mankind-project:

¹⁵ Brattain, “Race, Racism, and Antiracism”, p. 1412.

Right from the beginning Director-General Julian S. Huxley was preoccupied with identifying the tasks that could ensure peace in the long term. For that purpose he involved people around him, including his old friend Professor Joseph Needham, the eccentric biochemist from Cambridge University, who was in charge of British scientific assistance to China at the time. Needham had become deeply interested in Chinese culture and history and had just published a book on the history of Chinese technology, in which he demonstrated the enormous and underestimated importance of Chinese inventions on developments in other parts of the world.¹⁶

Needham found that the principal factor promoting historically significant social change was contact with strangers possessing new and unfamiliar skills. History could thus be better understood by emphasizing the mutual indebtedness and interdependence of the peoples of the world, and Needham suggested to Huxley that the new organization took on the task of writing a history of mankind stressing cultural interchange – as an antidote to the kind of history taught in many schools focusing on military and political events and based on ethnocentric biases and preconceptions. This would be a work that could be used as a source for classroom textbooks for schools in all countries and could contribute to UNESCO’s mission of education for peace.¹⁷

Huxley included Needham’s idea in his inaugural address as Executive Secretary of the Preparatory Commission for UNESCO in London in March 1946. In the speech, this grandson of Charles Darwin’s loyal defender, T.H. Huxley, defined the organization’s overall philosophy as a “scientific world humanism, global in extent and evolutionary in background”. This was a philosophy based on the conviction that history was a continuation of the general process of evolution, leading to some kind of social advance, even progress, featuring increased human control and the conservation of the environment and of natural forces and culminating in a unified world civilization. As far as UNESCO was concerned, this process should be guided by humanistic ideals of mutual aid, by the spread of scientific ideas, and by cultural interchange. And, Huxley claimed, the first and “chief task before the

¹⁶ Joseph Needham: *Chinese Science*. London: Pilot Press (1945).

¹⁷ Letter from Julian Huxley (Director-General, UNESCO) to L.H. Frank (Professor), 3.9.1948, 2.31 (2) – Planning of the work. UNESCO Secretariat. Natural Sciences Section (NS). File 9.3., SCHM 8, UNESCO Archives, Paris; Letter from Julian Huxley (Former Director-General, UNESCO) to F.J.H. Stratton (President of Caius College, Cambridge, UK), 5.9.1950, Box 19, The Julian Sorell Huxley Papers, Rice University, Houston (Texas); and Julian Huxley: *Memories*, vol 1, New York: Harper & Row (1970), p. 54.

Humanities today would seem to be to help in constructing a history of the development of the human mind, notably in its highest cultural achievement”.¹⁸

Needham was the first person Huxley invited to join the staff, and in March 1946 he returned from China. Watching the barrage of unread documents piling up on delegates at that time, Huxley decided to wait a couple of years before initiating the process of constructing a collective memory of mankind. But he and Needham discussed the idea whenever they had time. They knew, of course, that it would require a rather drastic selection to accommodate the history of the entire world in a few volumes, and during their search for the unifying element a member of staff recalled that a similar discussion had taken place during the war among the Allied Ministers of Education in exile in London. The idea of this project had been to promote European communality, but the ministers’ conclusion only confirmed Needham’s own supposition, namely that the major unifier between people of various cultures over time had been scientific knowledge and technology.¹⁹

During the first two months of 1947 the project began to take shape and was the subject of lengthy discussions with prominent scholars mainly from France about science as the prime mover in history. Looking at the notes that were the immediate outcome of these meetings, the plan still seemed fairly Eurocentric in the choices of the names and events that the work was to cover. In that sense the project was – for all its good intentions – a reflection of the fact that UNESCO’s principal contributors at all the various levels of the organization were at the time still primarily from France, United Kingdom and USA. The reason for this was that the USSR and several other Communist countries had refused to join the organization, while significant portions of other continents were under colonial rule.²⁰

In December 1947 the UNESCO General Conference in Mexico City adopted a resolution that welcomed the idea of producing a history of mankind with an emphasis on the “understanding of the scientific and cultural aspects of the history of mankind, of the mutual inter-dependence of peoples and cultures and of their contributions to the common heritage”.²¹ But the delegates also demanded a

¹⁸ Julian S. Huxley: *UNESCO: Its Purpose and its Philosophy*. London: Preparatory Commission for UNESCO (1946), p. 42.

¹⁹ Julian Huxley: “Notes on the History of Mankind: Cultural and Scientific Development”, December 1961, p. 2, “0.27 & 0.28”, SCHM 1 and *Compte-rendu sommaire d’une reunion avec Sir Ernest Barker et Sir Richard Livingstone* [Undated], 2.31 (1) – Planning of the work before the 1st Meeting of the Committee of Experts, SCHM 7, UNESCO Archives, Paris.

²⁰ Memo, 14.11.1947 and “Cultural and Scientific History of the World”. Suggestions by JSH – 1947”, Box 118, The Julian Sorell Huxley Papers, Rice University, Houston (Texas).

²¹ *Records of the General Conference of the United Nations Educational and Cultural Organization, Second Session*, Paris, UNESCO, 1947, resolution 5.7.

thorough study of how the more practical sides of the project were to be tackled before recommending its execution.

Shortly after this the project faced a major blowback. UNESCO had long been under suspicion from the US of being a cover for espionage, and the CIA had warned President Harry S. Truman that the organization was being infiltrated by communists. Joseph Needham attracted particular attention due to his interest in science and to the fact that he was a member of the Cambridge University Communist Group. UNESCO's involvement in the debate about atomic energy made the US fear that Needham would soon be able to bring secret information or even uranium samples to the USSR.²²

Needham felt under pressure to resign, and in the beginning of 1948 he moved back to Cambridge, where he began working on what was to become his masterpiece on science and civilisation in China.²³

With Needham out of the picture Huxley had to take on the himself, and in May 1948 he presented a plan of a work consisting of three volumes to be written by a single author whose immense task would be eased by having at his disposal so many resources that he would be able to draw on all the best scholars in the world. It should emphasize science as the prime mover in the evolution of human history, and he had even placed the world's cultures in various evolutionary layers – primitive, barbaric, intermediate and advanced – not much different from the hierarchy to be found in Charles Darwin's *Descent of Man*.²⁴ It was obviously a tough job to abandon well-established Eurocentric perceptions of the existence of dominant and subordinate cultures.

In the light of the United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights from 1948 and of the organization's debates on decolonization, the world was about to change, and this was soon to be reflected in UNESCO's work, too.

In late October 1948 Huxley had meetings and correspondence with European scholars to discuss Huxley's plan and its execution in order to sell it at the coming General Conference. Among the invitees were his friend Joseph Needham and his own brother, the author Aldous Huxley, now based in US. Also invited was the French historian Lucien Febvre, Professor at the Collège de France, who was already a living legend among fellow historians for his journal commonly known as the *Annales*, with

²² "Evaluation of Communist infiltration of UNESCO. Report. Central Intelligence Agency. Top Secret", 7.2.1947, Declassified Documents Reference System, Ohio University.

²³ Simon Winchester: *The Man Who Loved China*, New York: HarperCollins (2008), p. 166.

²⁴ "Notes on the Scientific and Cultural History of Mankind", May 1948, Box 118, The Julian Sorell Huxley Papers, Rice University, Houston (Texas).

its emphasis on social rather than political and diplomatic themes, and for his own agenda of organizing the past in accordance with present needs.²⁵

Febvre stressed that the History of Mankind project should in his eyes attempt truly to integrate all cultures in the new world civilization. Thus the final plan wiped out cultural hierarchies and emphasized the “exchanges” between all cultures. To ensure this global approach, the work was to be written by an entire group of specialists representing all continents. Huxley the evolutionist insisted, however, that the interactions should only be chosen when they indicated a direction that pointed forward towards greater unification and integration. The plan’s “universal character and the factors which it will take into account will invest it with a new meaning and a new scope,” Huxley concluded, fully content with this outcome.²⁶

However, the Americans for various reasons did not support Huxley’s continued candidacy for the post a Director-General, and in his memoirs Huxley describes how his last and most difficult task was to persuade the delegates at the General Conference in Beirut in Lebanon in November 1948 to implement his proposals for a history of mankind.

He managed to get the plan approved, but at the same time the delegates demanded that the views of the various national commissions and non-governmental organizations should be taken into account before the project got underway.²⁷

Suddenly and unexpectedly thrown open to national commissions and non-governmental organisations, the project was all at once at the mercy of a welter of new inputs. And as I have shown in an article in the *Journal of World History*, the project was in the beginning of the dominated by the French – especially Febvre – whose views of history was different from Huxley’s, and included an opposition towards strictly positivistic, evolutionistic and Eurocentric approaches. Highlighting the “exchanges and borrowings between peoples and countries” would be plenty in his eyes, and throughout the days that followed terms like “culture contacts”, “interrelations of cultures”, “interchange between peoples” and “cultural exchanges and transmissions” were used frequently.²⁸

²⁵ “Comments by Aldous Huxley”, October 1948, Box 118, The Julian Sorell Huxley Papers, Rice University, Houston (Texas).

²⁶ “Draft Document for the General Conference. Scientific and Cultural History of Mankind” [Undated], p. 1, 2.31 (1) – Planning of the work before the 1st Meeting of the Committee of Experts, SCHM 7, UNESCO Archives, Paris.

²⁷ Julian Huxley: *Memories*, Vol. 1, New York: Harper & Row (1970), p. 69.

²⁸ Summary records [12.-16.12.1949, “2.633 (1). Committee of Experts 12-16 Dec. 1949”, SCHM 23, UNESCO Archives, Paris.

However, in the early 1950s the Cold War was a harsh reality. Until the death of Joseph Stalin in March 1953, the Soviets had refused to have anything to do with UNESCO, but the Khrushchev administration inaugurated a reappraisal of USSR's foreign policy priorities and the country joined the organization in April 1954.²⁹

This would in a way make the project more international but at the same time the politicized Marxist history-writing was very much the image of what the History of Mankind project was not supposed to become in the eyes of its proponents.

The Soviet representative, Alexandre A. Zvorikine [Зворыкин Анатолий Алексеевич] who was a professor at the Institute of History at the USSR Academy of Sciences in Moscow, arrived in Paris in January 1956 and was appointed Vice-President of the Commission. Zvorikine proved to be a pleasant man, liked by all members of the Commission but especially the Americans feared that an alternative philosophy of history would change the basic approach of the entire project.³⁰

And the Soviet scientists would indeed manage to remove the shine from the miracle of a truly international history of mankind that the UNESCO was in the process of compiling. In November 1956, addressing Western ambassadors at a reception at the Polish embassy in Moscow, the Soviet leader, Nikita Khrushchev, made his dramatic claim. "Like it or not, history is on our side. We will bury you." This was a shock to everyone present. Khrushchev later claimed that he had not been talking about nuclear war but about the historically determined victory of communism over capitalism.³¹

At almost the same time as this was happening, the editorial board received the first full manuscript of one of the volumes. It was circulated it to the board members and to consultants all over the world and to the UNESCO National Commissions, from where the authors then would receive comments that would be incorporated before the volume was prepared for publication in September 1957.

But this time the Soviet comments were so voluminous that they verged on the absurd, and, since several of the eastern European countries that had also been included in the work sent in alterations on

²⁹ Ilya V. Gaiduk: "L'Union soviétique et l'UNESCO pendant la guerre froide", *60 ans d'histoire de l'UNESCO*. Paris: UNESCO (2007), p. 282.

³⁰ Answers from Louis Gottschalck and Caroline F. Ware (Author-Editors, SCHM) on A.A. Zvorikine's (Vice-President of the International Committee, SCHM) comments, 1.6. and 10.7.1956, "0.25 & 0.26", SCHM 1, UNESCO Archives, Paris; Charles Morazé: *Un historien engagé: Mémoires*. Paris: Fayard (2007), p. 183-184.

³¹ John Lewis Gaddis: *The Cold War: A New History*. New York: Penguin Press (2005), p. 84.

a similar scale, the Commission realized that there was no way that the authors could possibly comply with the deadline.³²

The field of history had now taken on a tangible reality as a major political battlefield of the Cold War, where the different sides of the Iron Curtain fought over the correct interpretation of their common past. As a Czech commentator concluded after having read one of the manuscripts: “Summarily it can be said of this study that the fact that the authors do not see the economic and political development in the world in the 20th century from a class point of view leads them to a positivist and unscientific interpretation of the events of this century.”³³ It was that kind of comment that prompted participants from the US to object to any acknowledgment given to the Communist scholars.

Of course the manuscripts also provoked other comment. Israel was riled by passages highlighting Arab objections to the State of Israel. A number of Muslim countries were provoked by the interpretation of the Christian crusades. The Catholic Church did not like the representation of religion as something that had a tendency to divide rather than unite people. There were also objections to the lack of priority given to African and South American history. And so on and so forth. But most of these disagreements could be solved by quiet diplomacy, by removing the more sensitive phrases in the text or by inviting more non-Western scientists to take part in the editorial work. However, when these had been dealt with what remained were the more fundamental ideological differences, and there was nobody on the Commission who had a clue how to overcome these.

As UNESCO moved into its new headquarters of cement and glass on la Place de Fontenoy at the foot of the Eiffel Tower in November 1958, the History of Mankind project was in decline, and almost came to a complete standstill, when the Soviet objections to the manuscripts reached their culmination point. This happened when the Commission received the final manuscript for Volume 6, covering the 20th century. Only a few days after the manuscript had been handed over to the Soviet scholars, Zvorikine and his colleagues returned a comprehensive critical review – a total of 500 pages of objections to the treatment of Communism, of technological developments in the USSR, of the Soviet

³² “Notes made by G.S. Métraux in the course of several meetings held with Mr. R. Williams of Little, Brown & Co. (February-March 1957)”, “0.27 & 0.28”, SCHM 1, UNESCO Archives, Paris.

³³ Memo from the author-editors of volume VI to the Bureau of the International Commission, SCHM, 14.4.1960, “0.27 & 0.28”, SCHM 1, UNESCO Archives, Paris.

economy and political system – not to mention a very detailed guideline for the re-writing of the entire manuscript.³⁴

It was difficult to see how to reach agreement. For how should the concept of democracy be dealt with when, according to Soviet historians, it only expressed “the will of the economically and politically dominant class”?³⁵ And could the concept of “colonialism” be used only about past Western phenomena, or could it also be used about Tsarist Russia, or the huge investments in other countries made by American companies?

The author felt obliged to incorporate into her text “contra-notes” to her Soviet colleagues’ notes, which they tried to prevent, and when they failed they demanded space for notes to the author’s notes.³⁶

From the sidelines the editor – the American historian Ralph E. Turner of Yale University – could only watch the conflict escalate without being able to take action himself. He remained chairman until his death in October 1964, and his rival in a parallel French-American conflict, the historian Charles Morazé, was sure that it was the project that ultimately cost Turner his life. One of Turner’s last words, allegedly had been: “That damned Commission!”³⁷

Several authors were on the verge of giving up on a number of occasions but felt obliged to do the hard work and take up the sometimes dramatic challenges – in long periods even without remuneration – out of goodwill and in honor of the organization with the perfect name, the United Nations. The hard work therefore barely had a fraction of the impact that some of them had envisioned in wake of Turner’s claim that it was going to be the most influential history book ever written.

Today the final version of *History of Mankind* does not play a role in historiography as an example for imitation but rather as a monument of a universalism that did not quite succeed.

But it would be unfair to regard the entire process leading up to the publication in that perspective, groundbreaking as it was as the first trial of nationalism and Euro-centrism after World War II and as the expression of how far it was possible to extend a Euro-centric view in an era of burdensome

³⁴ “Resolution adoptée par le Bureau au Cours de sa XV^{ème} reunion”, 27.-28.2.1961, “0.30”, SCHM 2; Letter from Julian Huxley (Vice-President of the International Commission, SCHM) to Paulo E. de Berrêdo Carneiro (President of the International Commission, SCHM), 17.4.1961, “2.624 (2). Dr. Julian Huxley”, SCHM 17, UNESCO Archives, Paris.

³⁵ Notes on the revised manuscript of volume VI, april 1963, p. 17, “0.27 & 0.28”, SCHM 1, UNESCO Archives, Paris.

³⁶ Letters from Guy S. Métraux (Secretary-General, SCHM) to Paulo E. de Berrêdo Carneiro (President of the International Commission, SCHM), 18.3. and 30.3.1965, “0.29”, SCHM 2, UNESCO Archives, Paris.

³⁷ Charles Morazé: *Un historien engage: Mémoires*. Paris: Fayard (2007), p. 183; Memo from Guy S. Métraux (Secretary-General, SCHM) to the International Commission, SCHM, 14.10.1964, “0.29”, SCHM 2, UNESCO Archives, Paris and letter from Julian Huxley (Vice-President of the International Commission, SCHM) to Guy S. Métraux (Secretary-General, SCHM), 6.11.1964, Box 37, The Julian Sorell Huxley Papers, Rice University, Houston (Texas).

ideological divisions and a time when Western colonialism was still very much both a political reality and a relevant frame of reference for the way historians looked at the world.

It is rather meaningful to characterize the process as the starting point of the post-war trend of writing global history due to the early start of the entire project and its ambition of focusing on “cultural exchanges and transmissions”, but also due to the fact that UNESCO used this particular project to form its so-called “World Heritage List” (1972) which is probably UNESCO’s most widely known activity today, as well as the fact that UNESCO maintained the ambition of writing history with global approach in wake of this first major attempt.

In 1978 the organization decided to embark on a new and completely revised edition of the work along the same basic principles to include those parts of the world – particularly Africa and South America – which had been heavily under-represented in the previous version. The work was published under the new title *History of Humanity* (1994-2005).

It was followed by several others, supporting the United Nation’s decolonization practice through a kind of “mental decolonization”, rehabilitating countries and continents by giving them a place in the history of humanity. The most noteworthy being the work initiated in 1966 as a response to the lack of information on Africa in the *History of Mankind*, which resulted in the *General History of Africa* published in the English edition from 1981 to 1993 in eight volumes. UNESCO’s series of area studies also include the important multi-volumes, *History of Civilizations of Central Asia* (1992ff), *General History of the Caribbean* (1997ff.), *The Different Aspects of Islamic Culture* (1998ff) and the *General History of Latin America* (1999-2009).

In that sense the History of Mankind-project did indeed have an impact – and even one that was possible to detect in the documents of the UNESCO Archives in Paris – being a project that became the starting point for new UNESCO initiatives. The impact of these initiatives, however, must be assessed through documents in other archives.

Exploring the difference

In an era of globalization which affects almost every aspect of our lives, there is certainly a need for books explaining the history of globalization. My personal ambition is to offer an alternative to the widespread way of thinking about the 20th Century as almost entirely dominated by violence and nationalism, by demonstrating how it was also influenced by the efforts of international organizations

to create transnational frames in the mind. But in order to understand the international organizations' role and relevance of the 20th Century I find it essential to assess their impact rather than the ideas behind them. This paper gives an impression of how difficult that can be in the absence of an obvious method to determine the exact impact of an international organization.

The foundation of UNESCO was indeed the beginning of a remarkable piece of mental engineering which at least reflected the intellectual mainstream of the postwar period. But did it also shape it? Several studies – including my own – indicate that the organization at least in the first formative years did influence it. But to what degree?

UNESCO was indeed a concrete, transnational place where people met and exchanged knowledge, ideas and opinions across national borders. But what happened to that knowledge after the national delegates had left the building? What happened to the documents that were sent from the UNESCO House to the UNESCO national commissions and the national ministries? Studies – including my own – indicate that the organization did influence national politics, and even show that it is possible to measure the effect as long as we are talking about conventions being implemented in the national legislations or specific documents being used for court decisions. But what happened to the rest of the thousands of documents produced by UNESCO every year? Did the content trickle down through the educational systems almost by itself? Was it filed and forgotten? Or was it used differently in the different member states?

I have tried different approaches to identify the precise extent to which UNESCO's initiatives have had an impact – but I still need to come up with a way that makes it possible to measure the precise effect of the initiatives. I am working on it and it's my ambition to make a difference as a historian by producing yet another document – a book – which will come up with an answer to exactly that question.