



United Nations
Educational, Scientific and
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Organisation
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Organización
de las Naciones Unidas
para la Educación,
la Ciencia y la Cultura

Организация
Объединенных Наций по
вопросам образования,
науки и культуры

منظمة الأمم المتحدة
للتربية والعلم والثقافة

联合国教育、
科学及文化组织

Address by H.E. Mr Altay Cengizer,

President of the 40th session of the General Conference

on the occasion of the 210th session of the Executive Board

UNESCO Headquarters, Paris

Thursday, 3rd December 2020

Esteemed colleagues, dear friends,

Madam Director-General,

Mr Chairman of the Executive Board,

I thank both of you heartily for convening this Board meeting so successfully under very difficult circumstances.

I wish to pay tribute to the late President Valéry Giscard d'Estaing. I remember him as the president who asked for an hour alone just to think, looking at Jean-Paul Sartre lying in front of him. I also remember his saying "*Style is the esthetic of action.*"

I heard enriching speeches yesterday and today. I also think that UNESCO had given a strong response under the leadership of the Director-General to this unforeseen and deep crisis. Everyone should be happy that UNESCO is showing its capabilities and relevance.

With regard to the "Open Ended Working Group on Governance" and in a more general context, this idea of "counterfactuals" keeps coming to my mind. "Counterfactual" is the "What if" question. The physical world does not allow such questions. You cannot ask nonsense questions like "what if it were the Sun that is revolving around the Earth, and not the Earth revolving around the Sun."

But in the realm of history, there can be so many counterfactuals. However, the discipline of History shuns counterfactuals. Still under the influence of the venerable school of Leopold Ranke, it does not take up what has not happened, what has not taken place...

Today, in order to have the license to ask counterfactual questions, you have to be a very famous and proven historian, even having your own television programs, like Niall Ferguson, who unabashedly asks such "What if" questions. Not all the time, but in order to explain better the more critical inflection points in history.

Indeed, not always, but sometimes, it is easier to understand what really happened if we think in opposites. Asking a counterfactual question is another means to comprehend better...

What if somebody did not come to believe that cats are the devil incarnate, because they are intelligent, they are always around and seem to be observing everything we do and probably report back our sins?

So the cats dealing with mice were hanged and the result was the Black Death, the plague which wrecked totally the face of Europe. But then, we would not have had, probably, the magistral work of Michel de Montaigne, who was haunted, even after more than a century by the memory of the Black Death. So, he basically confined himself to that famous tower, and wrote his famous Essays... The first of its kind.

Maybe years and years later, some historians specializing on UNESCO, if there will be any, dealing with every nitty-gritty aspect, ask the counterfactual question “what if the coronavirus crisis did not happen in the critical year of 2020, and that famous Open Ended Working Group had the chance to meet more often and deal with its agenda?”

The answer would be, I guess, that nothing would have changed anyway!

So, to know the answer, I would like to give this Group another chance and convene it, as calendars work and deadlines approach.

I do not usually react to Member States’ statements. But I have always found the distinguished representative of Saint Lucia truly inspiring, as the beautiful island she represents, with its unforgettable Pitons, which I had the chance to visit...

It is not that everything is political Madam!

It is rather, everything has the potential to degenerate into bickering daily politics, and surf on the passing strength of prejudice and prejudgments, without a desire to see the reality of it and what is really going on. At a time when, everyone seems to be content with their comfort zone, drawing back to it at the first opportunity, bickering and politicking is easy, whereas politics is an art, because at the end, you are called to face those more difficult questions.

At New York, there are built-in mechanisms, as it is conceived as the political arm of the UN System. UNESCO is different, we do not have built-in mechanisms to stop any political hi-jacking of our work. We do not let ourselves, for so many years now, to think about the deeper aspects of our challenges.

Thank you.
