70 Years After the United Nations and UNESCO, commemoration or celebration?

The United Nations represents a new design for global governance, with admirable clarity, foresight and solidarity built into the UN system’s design as a whole and the ethical principles and the keywords (sharing, cooperation, commitment) on which it was founded. The UN Charter commences with a phrase that today – given that human beings may now progressively express themselves freely- constitutes one of the most lucid guidelines for action: “We, the Peoples... have determined to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war”. It contains the cornerstones of the building that we must now construct: people; commitment to future generations; and preventing war, that is, building peace. Peace among ourselves, peace with the environment, peace at the personal, local, national, regional and international levels.

The UNESCO Constitution clearly states that humanity must be guided by “democratic principles” and that equal dignity is the basis of all human rights. Article I underscores that education is being “free and responsible” and to be so, it is essential to “promote the free flow of ideas by word and image”.

After World War II immediate aid was provided the vanquished through the Marshall Plan and matters essential for “the Peoples” were addressed with the creation of institutions specializing in food (FAO), health (WHO), labor (ILO) and, noteworthy for how urgently
it was founded and implemented, an organization for education, science, culture and communication (UNESCO).

Rapid action programs from these institutions sought to prevent a repeat of 1919 in which the Republican Party blocked the United States’ membership in the League of Nations, created by President Woodrow Wilson to ensure that diplomacy and dialogue would prevail over conflict (these international programs include wide-ranging environmental actions in geology, hydrology and oceanography; the creation in 1948 of an International Union for Conservation of Nature, the 1971 Man and Biosphere Program, and especially the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights to ensure human beings’ “freedom from fear”…

But that didn’t happen: States acting alone, as representatives of “the peoples”, veto, the arms race, loans instead of aid, exploitation instead of cooperation… Later, after the Soviet Union fell and the Commonwealth of Independent States was founded without bloodshed, thanks to the unexpected action of Mikhail Gorbachev; after the abolition of the abominable racism of apartheid, also thanks to the unexpected capacity for conciliation of Nelson Mandela…; when everything pointed to peace (the end of the civil wars in Mozambique and El Salvador, renewal of peace negotiations in Guatemala…), the Republican Party, with the United Kingdom as its acolyte, imposed its ambition for domination. The United Nations was relegated to a secondary role, replacing it with groups of plutocrats (G-6, G-7, G-8… G20); the United States withdrew from
UNESCO in 1984, followed by the United Kingdom, in the absurd belief that the value of ideas can be bought with money... And in 1989 during the jubilant ceremony to adopt the Convention on the Rights of the Child, President Bush, Sr. decided that the United States would not sign it..., while the World Trade Organization was directly placed outside of the scope of the United Nations... In that regard, many years ago the World Bank insidiously eliminated “for Reconstruction and Development” as its “last name”.

The results of this “partial security” that only protects 20% of humanity and of “globalizing neoliberalism” are obvious: an economy of speculation, delocalization of production and war (I will never tire of repeating that each day over 20,000 people die of hunger, the majority of whom are children between the ages of one and five, while at the same time 3 billion dollars are invested in weapons and military spending); the debilitation of the Nation-State; chaos and total inefficiency in global governance (G7 without Russia, G8 with Russia, G20 with emerging countries... when it’s clear that the only ones that are really important are the “G1” and “G2”, i.e., the United States and China); Europe that is now exclusively a monetary union, dependent on and strictly adhering to a neoliberalism that even President Obama has refused to follow, thus achieving a spectacular improvement in the American economy through significant investment and job incentives and creativity in R&D+I, despite radical opposition from conservative Republicans..., and –while invoking reasons of “national security”- achieving long-desired goals such as a the *medicare* system,
legalization of the situation of over five million immigrants and reducing defense spending... and offering an outstretched hand to Islam (Iran) instead of attacking it as the “axis of evil”, re-establishing diplomatic relations with Cuba... and, above all, radically changing the US’s bloody interventionist policies in Latin America (Operation Condor) through friendly, although sometimes tense, relations...

Europe, without a political and economic union, with no charted course, whose citizens have historically been welcomed in other countries, is now rejecting refugees and immigrants with an inadmissible lack of solidarity, having drastically reduced aid to development while embracing an economy totally dependent on the markets. Instead of being a symbol of democracy and imaginative initiatives, today neoliberal Europe is an area of conceptual and political confusion.

The world’s present problems, and especially those that may soon reach a point of no return, are undoubtedly quite different from those that existed when the United Nations was founded on October 24, 1945. The number of member states has quadrupled and there are many non-state protagonists on the global scene, some of them terrorists, the majority pacifists with a desire to help, but all of whom make this a totally different narrative. The United Nations has undoubtedly had a significant influence in preventing world wars... but having been weakened by the passing of world governance to other international entities, it is no less true that the
present ethical, social and political disaster requires an urgent re-founding of efficient democratic multilateralism before it is too late (and I must once again emphasize the irreversible processes in course).

Many of the activities of the United Nations system have resulted in laws and actions that benefit the whole of mankind – rights of women, indigenous communities and the disabled,... the Law of the Sea... but, once again, the problem is ensuring compliance... in a global context in which the United States, with its powerful Republican Party, has not signed or implemented conventions such as the one mentioned previously as an example, or others as significant as the International Criminal Court.

At the United Nations 50th anniversary I sponsored UNESCO’s Declaration of Principles on Tolerance whose Article I reads: “Tolerance is respect, acceptance and appreciation of the rich diversity of our world’s cultures, our forms of expression and ways of being human. It is fostered by knowledge, openness, communication and freedom of thought, conscience and belief. Tolerance is harmony in difference. It is not only a moral duty, it is also a political and legal requirement. Tolerance, the virtue that makes peace possible, contributes to the replacement of the culture of war by a culture of peace”. In addition, the first major meeting on social development was held in Copenhagen, adopting eight “commitments” that would have addressed (through innumerable meetings and conference) economic development, but what is
really essential, a life of dignity for all human beings. And, likewise, that same year the World Conference on Women and Development was held in Beijing.

Now, having reached this 70th anniversary, and prompted by the possibility of facing irreversible situations that seriously affect the habitability of the earth, it is now essential to re-found the United Nations system. Otherwise this will merely be a commemoration, not a celebration. This would be the only way to celebrate those 70 years, because it would result in the rebirth of the United Nations that President Roosevelt envisioned in 1944.

In 2012 I published “The Urgent Need for Democratic Multilateralism”, and since then I have insisted (particularly in several blogs and in contributions to the CEIPAZ Yearbooks) on the need to propose and urgently implement democratic governance on all levels (personal, local, national, regional and global), re-founding a United Nations adapted to our times in which all countries of the earth are threatened with the inescapable task of preventing irreversible damage to the quality of life on our planet. The Earth Charter is a document that should inspire action in that regard.

If now, urged by unprecedented global problems which require unprecedented and global measures, the re-foundation of the UN System was accelerated, the 70th anniversary would be a celebration. Otherwise, again, could be only commemoration, a last opportunity. Urgent action and a “road map” for a “revisited” UN
are feasible, as I present in a forthcoming article. The future is to be invented. We can do it. It is our hope.

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September 1, 2015