

UNITED NATIONS EDUCATIONAL,  
SCIENTIFIC AND CULTURAL ORGANIZATION

Address by  
Mr. René Maheu

Director-General  
of the United Nations Educational,  
Scientific and Cultural Organization  
(Unesco)

at the banquet given by the U.S. National Committee  
for the MAB on the occasion of the third session  
of the International Co-ordinating Council of the  
Man and the Biosphere Programme

Williamsburg, U.S.A., 25 September 1974

Madam Chairman,  
Mr. Mayor,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,

The third session of the International Co-ordinating Council of the Man and the Biosphere Programme, of which this banquet is to mark the happy conclusion, is of special interest to Unesco. I am therefore particularly glad to be with you tonight and I am grateful to the United States National Commission for MAB and its Chairman, Dr. Donald R. King, for their invitation to address you on this occasion.

We are gathered in this historic city of Williamsburg to further the development of an international research programme on the interactions between man and the biosphere and at the same time to celebrate the bi-centenary of the United States. These two purposes are not directly related and yet I feel for many reasons that this conjuncture is a very meaningful one.

Williamsburg is one of those symbolic names that evoke some of the most significant turning points of human history, when man has taken a decisive step forward. Here in this town, two hundred years ago, a resurgent impulse towards freedom and independence led to a new approach in the form of government. And again, in the middle of the last century, Williamsburg witnessed the victory of those who were fighting for a new conception of the freedom of the individual and of the relations between men of different creeds and races. In both cases the old order, which no longer corresponded to the needs of society and to the vision of man, was being superseded by new ideals and the assertion of new rights.

I believe that a certain new conception of human rights also lies behind the intergovernmental, interdisciplinary programme on Man and the Biosphere. For me, the ultimate objective of the MAB programme is to organize the utilization of resources in the various regions of the world in such a way as to maximize its benefits for every living human being, while preserving options and possibilities for the future generations. And here also, as two centuries ago, the rights of each man are set so as to be compatible with the rights of all men, those alive and those yet to be born. The ideals of the American Revolution and of the movement against slavery placed freedom, democracy and social dignity in the hands of the individual. Similarly, the rationale behind the MAB programme is to ensure that the physical, biological and other environmental requirements of man are placed in the hands of each of us and remain under our overall control.

Furthermore, in many important respects MAB contains the elements of some kind of revolution in scientific methodology. The traditional specialized approach to scientific research ignores many of the complex interactions and interrelationships which determine the nature and quality of our environment. By emphasizing an integrated global interdisciplinary approach, the MAB programme has changed what the American educator Thomas Kuhn has called "the paradigms of science". At all stages in the development of a MAB project, natural scientists and social scientists alike are being asked to take into account the paradigms of each other's disciplines and make a combined effort based on the understanding of each other's viewpoints. MAB is essentially problem-oriented and the problems facing the ecological units and

geographical regions of the world in the three-way relationship between man, environment and resources, are being tackled under this programme as integrated wholes.

This third session of the International Co-ordinating Council of MAB has been in several respects an important one. In the first place, since the Programme is now at the critical point of transition from the planning to the implementation stage, the decisions which have been taken are of special consequence both for the co-operating Member States and the Organization. In addition, it so happens that this is the first large-scale Unesco conference convened in the United States. I welcome this development not only for its own sake, but even more so for the further evidence it provides of the importance which the Government and the scientists of this country attach to questions of the environment and to the need for international co-operation in resolving them.

Two significant events earlier this year have already pointed in that direction. The first was the agreement reached between the United States and the Soviet Union at the Moscow summit conference this summer for both countries to contribute to the MAB programme by designating certain natural areas as biosphere reserves. The second was the ratification by the United States - the first nation to do so - of the Convention concerning the World Cultural and Natural Heritage adopted by the General Conference of Unesco in 1972. Since then seven other nations have followed the United States' lead - Algeria, Australia, Bulgaria, Egypt, Iraq, Sudan and Zaire - and I hope that we shall soon have the twenty ratifications needed for the Convention to enter into force.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The environmental problem with which you are concerned is a typical example of those increasingly numerous problems which are of planetary proportions. Such problems, which affect man wherever he is, can only be resolved through a collective effort planned, organized and executed by the international community acting in concert. In the case of the rational management of the natural heritage of mankind, it is clear that it can no longer be assured by individual nations acting on their own.

That is why among environmentalists today, indeed among scientists of all kinds, there seems to be a growing awareness of the crucial rôle that international co-operation can play in solving these global problems, some of which are already assuming a dramatic degree of urgency. But, paradoxically, political tendencies in the world today seem to be moving in the opposite direction. Nationalism is everywhere dominant. The word of course has gone somewhat out of fashion; instead of "nationalism" we hear much of "political realism". But the "sacro egoismo", to quote Mussolini, of the national sovereign State is still there, more powerful than ever. Nations now act "realistically" for what they consider their own interests - which in most cases are nothing more than short-term, narrow objectives. The effects are well known: disruption of what remains of an international order, growing tension and even armed conflicts.

I believe that we have now reached the point in world affairs where we must have a systematic reorganization of international relations on all levels. This reorganization is needed urgently because of the changing balance of power and because of the nature of the major problems currently facing the international community. Let me comment briefly on each of these reasons.

As regards the changing balance of power in the world, the most striking example concerns the oil-producing countries. This change has already provoked a crisis of the first order in the industrialized countries of the West, notably in

Europe. It threatens now the whole international monetary system, which will have to undergo a radical revision if we are to avoid world-wide economic chaos.

But it is worth noting also that the change in the balance of power has affected not only the traditional supremacy of the Western developed nations. The energy crisis has struck even more severely at most of the developing countries, whose economic and financial problems are even more severe and which, with only a few exceptions, receive very little financial aid from the newly rich States of the Third World.

In fact, just as the oil crisis has shown how unwise it was for the Western industrial economy to base itself on a supposedly indefinitely cheap source of energy, so, too, it has served to reveal the significant differences and inequalities existing among the countries of the Third World. These differences had always been there, but they have been masked until now by a façade of common opposition to certain policies of the developed countries.

We can now clearly see the outlines of what is already being called the "Fourth World" - a world composed of the poorest and least endowed countries. These "least favoured nations", which have been identified - their number is around 32 - are beset with almost insoluble problems and it is for them that last April's session of the United Nations General Assembly decided to launch a "Special Programme".

Let me add a few words about the changes that have taken place in military matters. We are all aware that despite a measure of real detente, the two super-powers continue to compete with each other in producing more efficient destructive weapons. We are aware, too, of the proliferation of nuclear weapons and their miniaturization. We know also of the massive arms purchases made by certain oil-producing countries, arms either for themselves, or for their allies. Knowing all this, it would be foolish not to consider the possibility of local conflicts which the superpowers would no longer be able to keep under control within their boundaries and which would adversely affect their policy of detente. The Middle East may well furnish us with an example of just this kind of inflammatory, uncontrollable local conflict.

In the face of these ominous changes of far-reaching consequences, the attitudes and policies of the world's power centres, whose relations with one another constitute the basis of our precarious international equilibrium, appear to be dangerously lacking in imagination and courage. An atmosphere of sauve-qui-peut, of "each nation for itself", seems to prevail everywhere. Governments with only the immediate national interest in view negotiate with any other government that is willing to bargain with them on the same grounds and for the same purposes. This kind of bargaining is prejudicial to the establishment of a true peace, which can only be based on a system of collective security - economic as well as political security.

So much for the perspective of the world today when looked at from the point of view of power relations. But if we look at the world's problems, the picture appears quite different. What is most striking, from this angle, is the "globalization" of our problems, or at least of the most important ones. By globalization, I mean one of two things:

either that the problems affect the whole of mankind - even if in varying measure - and can be grasped and resolved only when considered at the scale of the planet;

or that, even though the problems touch only a part of humanity, they cannot be tackled adequately except through a concerted effort of the world community acting together.

Examples pertaining to the first category are legion. Think only of the rational use of natural resources and of the preservation of the equilibrium of the biosphere, including the quality of man's environment. Or think of the problems of population growth and food supply, or of communication between the peoples of the world. All these problems demand world approaches and world solutions.

As to the second category, I would mention the problems of the underdeveloped nations, of misery and poverty in every form, from famine to illiteracy, the continuing obstacles to the free flow of ideas around the world, the problem of reducing racial tension, disarmament problems, especially the control of nuclear weapons. These issues are also clear examples of the necessity for a vast, concerted effort at international co-operation.

Such are the two kinds of problems which I would like to call the "problems of mankind". They are vital ones, by far the most important for all of us.

National problems imply the use of political realism for particular ends. But the problems of mankind require very different attitudes, methods and instruments. To deal with them we need a world-wide organizational effort aimed at global progress, and we need a universal ethic of human behaviour.

Must we make a choice between these two approaches - the national and the universal? Personally, I do not think so.

I certainly believe that the universal approach will sooner or later win out over the national approach. But I realize, of course, that the rôle of the national State is still predominant in world affairs. To deny this obvious fact would be folly.

My position, therefore, is that we must work for a methodological and gradual transition from the national to the universal approach, making sure that the process of organizing the international community does not alter the identity and originality of individual nations.

For the concerted action and multilateral negotiation required for this transition, the United Nations system offers the only framework and the only instrument acceptable to all parties. Only in the United Nations can multilateral negotiations on an equal footing take place among 138 States. The moment has come for governments to use this instrument to the maximum. But this in turn requires that the United Nations - and by this I mean the whole United Nations system - receive both resources it has so much lacked until now.

One may argue that the United Nations systems require internal restructuring in order to improve its effectiveness. I agree with this view. But these reforms could be effected with relative ease since they should not require any fundamental modification of the United Nations Charter or the Constitutions of the various organizations.

In conclusion, I wish to reiterate my firm conviction - together with my hope - that a new world order - political, monetary, economic and social - should now be established. Such a step is essential to satisfy the claims of so many people for their rightful share of the wealth of the world and to create the conditions of a lasting peace through collective security. Unlike the preceding ones which

were conceived and imposed by the victors in 1919 and 1945 at the end of the two World Wars, the new order must be freely negotiated and freely adopted by all States and all peoples, not conceived and imposed by the rich and the strong.

The lesson we have all learned from the American Revolution is that only what is built on the free will of man is just and able to withstand the strains of change.