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UNITED NATIONS EDUCATIONAL,
SCIENTIFIC AND CULTURAL ORGANIZATION

Address by
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(UNESCO)

on 'The sharing of knowledge'

General,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is for me an honour and a privilege to be welcomed at the Ecole Polytechnique, one of the most prestigious institutions of higher education in the world. Its reputation in France and abroad bears witness above all to the correctness and strength of the conviction of those who founded it more than 200 years ago, that any society must give the highest priority to training its top scientists and technical specialists, since on that depends its very survival.

Yes, more than 200 years ago, the founders of the Ecole Polytechnique showed great foresight. Today we are often lacking the longer term view, even though we sorely need it, confronted as we are at present by a number of disquieting trends.

As students of this School, you are both affected by, and active participants in, the history of that conviction, a history made up of a succession of complex situations in which the relations between politics and knowledge, knowledge and development, and knowledge and ethics have been at the heart of enterprises that generated passion and excitement, and the success of which has gradually turned France into a modern nation.

I have chosen the theme of the sharing of knowledge because it lies at the point where politics meet ethics, the point where applications founded on knowledge embody political decisions founded on values. Political decisions must be based on correct, accurate, methodical and specific information, but they need to be guided by values, which are situated on a different plane. As one of my favourite poets, Fernando Pessoa, once said, the moon reflects in both the greatest lakes and the smallest puddles, because it shines high enough in the sky.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

In a very short while you will be called upon to shoulder considerable responsibilities in society, following the very full training of such a high standard that you have received here and the way in which you have responded to its demands on the basis of your individual merit. But although I am fully aware how difficult it is to enter the Ecole Polytechnique and how outstanding the training is that it provides, I am equally aware, as Director-General of an intergovernmental organization active in 187 states in the fields of education, science, culture and communication, of the awesome realities awaiting you when you leave the School.

Indeed, the decisions you will have to take throughout your working lives will no longer concern your personal background or choices; they will be decisions fraught with consequences for other people, for the citizens of the societies in which you will be called upon to act.

Then it is that you will realize the extent - and the limits - of your knowledge, and the ethical implications of your acts. Furthermore, a decision taken here today may tomorrow, at the other side of the world, have unforeseen repercussions which may then also rebound, continue, and return to transform the place where the decision was taken. Yes, you will have to deal, perhaps to a greater extent than any other generation before you, with globality, interdependence, complexity and irreversibility.

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Here, in this privileged place, cradle of the elite, must be symbolically admitted - and those responsible for your training are perfectly aware of this need - the excluded, the silent, all those powerless to decide, to create, to express themselves, to act with the freedom that belongs to a human being, all those unable to make plans for the future because they live in extreme poverty or because they have no access to education, even at the elementary level. Those for whom the horizon is not a matter of wondering what tomorrow will bring but of how to get through today with all its hunger, misery and hurt.

These billions of women and men are shut off from wealth and knowledge; and yet they are not ignorant. On the contrary, they know, perhaps better than we do, what nature is and recognize the value of water, medicine, speech and silence; they know the price of human dignity and plenitude.

This goes to show how receptive we should be to them, to their knowledge and their wisdom, since the sharing of knowledge can only take place in dialogue. And from this dialogue may spring a vision of the world different from our view of it today, which accentuates splits, disparities, imbalances and violence. There is an urgent need to transcend such a view which perpetuates an anachronistic pattern of thought, since the reconstitution of a social fabric that has been torn apart is a long and painful process. Ask the peoples of Bosnia or Guatemala, of Sri Lanka or the Sudan, of Rwanda or the Congo, if it is easy to forgive and to begin to live together once more.

Globality was the word I used just now - globality, not globalization, a term being drummed into us but which covers only a small part of reality. By globality, I mean quite simply the planetary scale. It is impossible today to talk in terms of factions, as if each community, each nation or each region could still function as a self-contained unit. Yes, we are doing fine here, in this School, in France, but that is nothing. The population of France, Spain, Italy, of the whole of Europe, including Russia, i.e. the population of 'greater Europe' plus that of the United States - all amounts to only two thirds of the population of India. That is the reality. That is what globality is about. That is what we should never forget if we wish at any time to assess the significance of a decision we have to take.

Something else of increasing importance in decision-making is the time factor. In any process there exists a point of non-return, a point at which things become irreversible. Those working in the medical field know about the vital need to take a decision in time, even if the diagnosis is incomplete, in order to avoid the irreversible. A proper diagnosis can only be made after the autopsy, when all the causes of the infection will be known . . . but it will be too late. Acting in time - that is one of the main requirements that you will need to satisfy when carrying out your important duties. Resist the temptation to ask for yet another report, an additional study, a further survey; in matters of urgency, have the courage to make do with the information in your possession and take your decision. That is what you will often have to do, acting in uncertainty, anxiety or even with a torn heart.

At the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro, the leaders of the nations solemnly proclaimed that they were going to do what had to be done for the environment. Five years later, nothing has been achieved. The greenhouse effect is continuing and growing. Polluters continue to pollute. Declaration follows declaration, and things just continue as before: Yes, the sense of irreversibility has now become an intrinsic part of the moral responsibility we all bear, beginning with the leaders.

To take valid decisions, one must nevertheless know the real situation - really know it, with more than merely a vague grasp of it. Take the example of the crisis now affecting the countries of South-East Asia. It simply demonstrates that the 'miracle' of these emerging countries was purely artificial.

The forecasting apparatus - even that of the most powerful institutions or states - is incapable of measuring the scale of the consequences of the movement towards economic globalization. Worse still, the 'specialists' who for years submerged us under an avalanche of rates, indicators and graphs to laud the undeniable merits of the economic miracle in Asia, are quite cheerfully demonstrating to us today, this time with the assistance of other batteries of equally complicated figures, why it was clearly impossible for this try to be converted.

Is it not time for us to ask questions about the criteria on which billions of dollars were invested in a dubious process? Is it not time to throw doubt on the omnipotence of assessments in which pride of place is occupied by the short term, by macroeconomic factors and by percentages? The first consequences are now making themselves felt - galloping unemployment in several of the former 'dragons' and 'tigers', expulsion of immigrant workers in a continent where more than 700 million humans are living on the verge of extreme poverty, a nervous waiting game being played by the world markets, and so on.

The reality of Africa is quite different from what our analysts tell us. It is claimed that Africans have not been capable of bringing about the economic take-off of their countries, but the problem is not one of ability. Instead of encouraging endogenous development, promoting the sharing of knowledge, or giving Africans the means to do things for themselves, donors have gone in for 'transplants', increased the number of loans and thus set in motion the spiral of debt. They have added a veneer of development of a kind that is foreign to the local culture. Behind the economic development of a country, there is that country's own capacity, which is that of each of its inhabitants. To know the real situation in Africa, we must ask the right questions. Who does it belong to? To whom do its resources - oil, diamond and gold mines, cotton or fruit - belong? Africa no longer owns its resources. The very harvest is sometimes entrusted to foreign hands. Without being able to exploit its raw materials, without the necessary specialized knowledge, without the financial leeway that is needed, how could Africa join in world trade?

Awareness of the overall situation also means being able and knowing how to make comparisons. We, who are lucky enough to live in rich countries, in wealthy societies, find it difficult to appreciate this good fortune. Of whatever we possess we know the price but not the value. And yet . . . when we wake up in the morning, should we not savour the good fortune of living in a country at peace? When we turn on the tap, water flows out - fresh water, drinking water, what a luxury! In the evening, if we feel like carrying on reading, all we have to do is push a button and the magic of electricity brings us a steady, reliable light. This ease, this comfort, this luxury seem to us quite natural and we do not savour them, just as we do not savour as we should the individual freedoms guaranteed to us by the smooth functioning of our democracies. Grasping reality means becoming aware of the differences, imbalances and injustices that characterize this end-of-the-century world, a world in which the notions of security and of threat have altered in nature.

Poverty, ignorance, sickness, population growth, environmental degradation, the growing scarcity of resources, frustration and exclusion engendering extremism and violence - these are the real enemies, the real threats, the causes of so many internal conflicts today, and neither preventive diplomacy nor the imposition of peace can root them out. The United

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Nations itself has placed the emphasis in recent years on conflict management, but it is further upstream, at the abolition of the underlying causes of conflict, that the available human and financial resources must be targeted.

To come back to the example of South-East Asia: this is the region, after the Middle East, which has spent the bulk of its resources on buying arms in recent years. One thing is clear. The combined effect of economic policies dictated by market requirements and of geo-strategic policies dictated by an outdated view of the world can produce only a dead end, or disaster.

What is the answer, you might ask? Since I am here as the representative of an institution, allow me to quote to you a brief extract from the Preamble of UNESCO's Constitution, written more than 50 years ago, at the end of the Second World War: *'That a peace based exclusively on the political and economic arrangements of governments would not be a peace which could secure the unanimous, lasting and sincere support of the peoples of the world, and that the peace must therefore be founded, if it is not to fail, upon the intellectual and moral solidarity of mankind'*. There we have words that are truly visionary. In the first place, they call in question the consequences, for the peoples of the world, of governmental agreements in economic matters and especially in matters of peace. They then in fact put forward the idea of the support of the peoples of the world and indicate a clear route to peace - 'the intellectual and moral solidarity of mankind' - which it is UNESCO's duty to promote in the fields of education, science, culture and communication throughout the world.

Only in the exercise of this intellectual and moral solidarity is there the possibility of a true sharing of knowledge. As I have already said, the first essential for solidarity and sharing is dialogue since we have to realize that our ability to act is often paralysed by our inability to see the world from the standpoint of those who suffer.

'Intellectual solidarity' means striving for a greater transfer of knowledge, harnessing science to serve development, providing education for everyone throughout their lives, restoring the value of the cultural and natural heritage and helping all countries to develop their information and communication capacities.

'Moral solidarity' means making education a means of emancipation and peace so that every person can learn to learn, learn to do, learn to take the initiative and above all learn to live together; it means including all those excluded from knowledge, harnessing science and technology to serve development having regard to people's needs rather than to what is 'profitable', promoting cultural pluralism in order to safeguard the diversity of cultures, which is our true wealth, and defending freedom of expression, that pillar of democracy.

The promotion of this intellectual and moral solidarity is an essential task for intellectuals, scientists, artists and above all for decision-makers. Thus, and only thus, will peace no longer be conceived of merely as the absence of war, and will people regard it as a process that has to be constructed day by day, doggedly and with hope, within each community. Thus, and only thus, will development no longer be conceived solely in terms of growth when its real function is first to promote individual emancipation and self-reliance by enabling everyone to discover their own creativity. Lastly, thus, and only thus, will we restore to democracy the vigour which it lacks today, once again placing the ideals of dignity, equality and respect for the human person at the core of our individual and collective conduct.

Polytechnicians, you possess the knowledge. You also need boldness, the boldness that will enable you to innovate, decide, advance, and change. You must not be afraid of using your privileges for the benefit of the many. This way, you will not be a disappointment to your children, who will not be able to say of you, in the terrible words of Albert Camus: 'They were able to do so much, but they dared to do so little . . . '.