

REFLECTIONS ON OUR AGE ¹

by STEPHEN SPENDER

The essays in this volume are based on a series of public lectures given in Paris in November and December 1946, in connection with the first General Conference of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO).

These lectures were given for the most part by speakers who did not belong to the organisation of UNESCO, partly to interest the public of Paris in the main themes of Education, Science and Culture, partly to enable some of the greatest authorities in the world to take up attitudes towards the projects of the most ambitious organisation for helping cultural relations all over the world which the world has ever seen. They serve to show the *things*, the concrete material and the living ideas which are the concern of an organisation whose name might suggest merely abstract generalities.

The fact is that every intellectual interest might have been covered by these lectures, as being part of the interest of UNESCO. There is no branch of Science, which might not have been included among the subjects of the lectures, nor any of the arts. The selection only indicates the vast amount of material in which UNESCO should be interested. So far from being inclusive, it points to gaps, such as music and the theatre, not discussed here, which are also UNESCO's concern.

The lectures are roughly divided into those in which intellectuals, such as J.-P. Sartre, Pierre Bertaux, and A.J. Ayer, express their attitudes towards problems confronting them in their work as writers, philosophers and teachers today; and those more closely concerned with education, science and culture.

Thus as a collection the volume has the unity of the themes of UNESCO, which itself suggests as infinite possibilities of diversity as an instrument whose notes are the different intellectual interests of individuals in all the different countries of the world. To reveal the potentialities of this instrument, it should also be played on by outstanding minds of all the countries of the world. Here, as in the choice of subjects, the collection emphasises its own limitations, since most of the writers are French, American or English.

Any lecture on any subject connected with education, science or culture by any outstanding authority belonging to any country in the world, would, in a sense, fit into this anthology. Yet running through the volume are two questions at the back of the mind of each writer. One is: 'Can a world organisation such as UNESCO help the development of education, science and culture throughout the world?' The second question which, more personally, most of the speakers ask themselves is: 'Can my contribution to a branch of intellectual activity help the world to attain a higher standard of knowledge and understanding, and the certainty of peace?'

It is remarkable that most of the writers here have the confidence that the answer to both questions is 'Yes'. Only one or two answer 'No', and only a few ignore these questions and devote themselves exclusively to their subject. Most are convinced of the necessity of exchanges between the intellectual workers and also the intellectual achievements of all nations, and they are also convinced that these exchanges need to be greatly

¹ Foreword to the publication "Reflections on Our Age", London, Wingate, 1948. This CD-ROM includes the texts of speeches given at the Sorbonne on the occasion of the first General Conference of UNESCO, by Maurice Bowra, William G. Carr, Yuen Ren Chao, Julian S. Huxley and Howard E. Wilson.

stimulated. They are aware also of ways in which, in their own work, they can be helped by an international organisation. They are not afraid that the diffusion of knowledge, education and culture will lead to a colourless internationalism which will threaten the particular quality of the individual and the place. Thus, although there is a diversity of views here, there is a remarkable unity of opinion, of expectation and hope. This volume is a testimony to the responsibility of a world organisation to administer intellectual and spiritual aid to the whole world, while at the same time strengthening the intellect and the spirit in every separate region.

Nor is it in any way regrettable that there are disagreements. One lecturer, Aragon, attacks another, André Malraux. There are passages of passion, of violence even, which at first glance seem hardly suitable to the detachment of the aims of UNESCO. Yet an international organisation can, if it is to be strong and real, only be born within the turbulence and controversy of each nation. Otherwise it will tend to become an international academy or bureaucracy.

What is most valuable here is the free expression of the attitudes of independent intellectual workers towards an intellectual organisation. For ultimately this organisation – UNESCO – will depend on independent minds having a critical attitude towards it. The teacher, the worker in the laboratory, the writer, must identify himself with UNESCO and at the same time must criticise it radically. UNESCO must become a world parent for whom all these intellectual workers have feelings of attachment. And beyond the teachers, the scientists and the artists, there are the people themselves: the readers, the consumers, the victims of many years of war who want peace. Ultimately, UNESCO is responsible to all these, and part of its task should be to bridge the gap between the specialist working in his separate field, and the ordinary people who need science, education and culture, ministered in the interests of the whole world, without which there can be no peace.

BIOGRAPHY OF THE AUTHOR

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From May to December 1946, Stephen Spender was cultural advisor to the UNESCO Preparatory Commission. In 1947, he was a consultant to UNESCO on cultural matters.