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TRANSCRIPT OF INTERVIEW OF

LOURDES ARIZPE

BY

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THOMAS G. WEISS: This is tape one, the 9th of May 2002, Tom Weiss interviewing Lourdes Arizpe at the Graduate Center. Lourdes is in New York as a visiting professor at New York University. I wonder whether we might begin at the beginning, and whether you could tell me something about your family, education, and background, with particular reference to why circumstances over which we have very little control contributed to your own interest in culture, anthropology, and international cooperation.

LOURDES ARIZPE: The first thing that I would mention is that my father, a Mexican from the city of Monterrey, in the north, was already bicultural in that he had had contacts with Americans for many years. He was a champion chess player, and he played at the American Club in Monterrey. He was then sent to Lima, Peru as an executive, where he met my mother, and later on to Buenos Aires in Argentina.

My mother was also bicultural. She was Swiss, from the German part of Switzerland, from Bern. She spoke five languages. She had been born in Peru, was then raised in Switzerland, then she went back to Peru. My grandparents, like good Swiss, had a *penzion*. And my father, as a dashing, young, handsome executive came to the *penzion* and fell in love with their daughter. Once married, they went to Buenos Aires, which was then the cultural capital of Latin America, where my sister was born. So you can imagine the cultural context of my childhood. We had Argentinean magazines arriving at the house—a household which was half-Swiss, half-Mexican in food, discipline and decoration—and books of world literature in English. My mother spoke several languages with her parents who lived with us. Any my father spoke English fluently, and took us to the United States (U.S.) on visits.

The context, on the other hand, the whole living surroundings were Mexico. And I played the guitar, like everyone in my family. We knew all the songs. And there were women and men who worked at our house as domestics, or as chauffeurs. I had a very close relationship to some of the women employees, one of whom happened to be a Nahuatl-speaking Indian from San Martin Texmelucan. She used to tell me stories without end, which fascinated and terrorized me, stories of spirits and the devil, of trees that spoke and animals that flew. She interspersed words in Nahuatl. I loved to listen to the cadence of the way she told stories, to the sounds of the Nahuatl language, but more especially a universe grew inside me, vast and dark, full of mysterious powers and beings.

So here I was, living in a linguistic environment where I was constantly hearing other languages. I was also finding that different languages had all these cultural references that crisscrossed in my daily life. I attended an American primary school, and I was put in the class with American children. So most of what I had read as a child and as an adolescent were the typical books about Merlin and the Knights of the Round Table, about mysteries solved by Nancy Drew and the Hardy Boys. At the same time, the whole social environment was Mexican with this great emphasis on family relationships, on ritual kinship, on the life in the *barrio*, and on knowing and visiting rural communities, which I loved to do. My parents enjoyed going away for weekends, or for vacations, to rural areas. And there I was very quickly put into contact with the way of life Mexican peasants, Mexican Indians, and some of my Mexican relatives who lived, for example, in the city of Veracruz, on the coast, and in other cities of Mexico.

I think it was this multicultural environment in which I grew up that made everyday life very problematic because I had to juggle different values and usually ended up either not understanding enough or understanding too much. The need to understand cultures drove me towards anthropology,

although it took me a long time to find my vocation. I always say that anthropology is my vocation, yet literature is my passion. Having begun reading English books for adolescents, my sister then gave me European books to read. So I was reading *War and Peace* and *Anna Karenina* by Tolstoy at thirteen. I also became familiar with the French literature, because when I was nine years old, my sister took me to learn French with a highly cultured French lady who played French parlor games with me at first. She opened up this marvelous window into the world through French literature. One of the most influential writers for me was Victor Hugo. So I think that my whole intellectual outlook was formed through French literature and European literature generally. But this was always contextualized inside in a universe of mysterious powers.

TGW: Tell me a little bit about your university years, how you ended up where you ended up, and what are the most striking memories you have of that period.

LA: The first experience with university I had was the University of the Pacific in Stockton, California. Surprisingly, when I arrived, since I had taken the SAT tests, I was assigned to the Honors English class! Nobody could believe a Mexican was in that class. In fact, after reading so voraciously, I liked to write and had written my first mini-novel when I was twelve. At the University of the Pacific I was on the dean's list, but I left after a year. I didn't like it because of the sororities and the racial undertones of this private university.

Next, I went to Geneva, to the School of Interpreters. At the University of Geneva, my parents had sent me to study to be an interpreter because I was not sure what I wanted to study. There I remember that, as part of practice in the school, we were taken to the United Nations in Geneva. And I listened with total awe to these interpreters who could translate not only the words, but also the meanings through the many semantic and inflective tones that could be used. If the delegate coughed,

the interpreter coughed. I was astonished that they were able to translate the meaning, or rather to interpret meaning and to transmit it at the same time that they were thinking about the next phrase.

The article I wrote for one of the volumes of the history of UN ideas on the interpreters of the United Nations I entitled “To Convey the Spirit.” Because I know that what interpreters do at the United Nations is to convey the spirit of what is being said, very different from literal translation since it requires a deep knowledge of geo-politics, of history, and of many specialized domains.

After Geneva I went back to Mexico. I began to work as an interpreter but then decided I needed many more subjects to fill the spaces of the multicultural universe in my mind. I started to attend anthropology classes as a listener only. But when I began to read the books I was enthralled. I found my vocation. Am I giving you too many details?

TGW: No, no at all. This is perfect.

LA: Then came 1968. Like everyone in my generation, I went to London. I wanted to study anthropology there. I talked to I.M. Lewis. I remember he was the director of the anthropology department at the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE). He was warmly attentive to me, and said, “Well, go back to Mexico and finish your studies in anthropology, and then come back to do your postgraduate work.” That was excellent advice. I did go back to Mexico. I arrived just at the time when student demonstrations were exploding everywhere. But the amiable conversations with six-foot “bobbies” accompanying the marches in London was very different from the brutal treatment we were getting in Mexico in marches and meetings. A frightened macho President Díaz Ordaz, ordered the brutal massacre of more than 300 students and innocent bystanders on October the 2nd, when students that I knew were not only murdered, but they simply disappeared. The worst thing was the silence after the 2nd of October. There was not a word in the newspapers about the massacre. Why?

Because the Olympics were beginning a few days later, and the Olympics had priority over the lives of young people in Mexico. You can imagine how devastatingly indignant that made me and all my fellow students and how much it politicized and radicalized me.

So I then participated very actively in radical student activities. But I also sped through the School of Anthropology. I did my first year of fieldwork in a little mountain village in the Sierra Madre Occidental of Puebla, where the most wonderful people lived, who were monolingual, and spoke only the Nahuatl language.

TGW: The language of your nursemaid.

LA: Yes, exactly—a slightly different dialect. What she spoke was Nahuatl, and in Zacatipan they spoke Nauat, so there was just a slight difference. But in the spoken language it makes a big difference. So I lived in this village, which was four hours away on foot from the nearest road. The people still used the traditional dress. They lived completely dispersed in this extraordinary sierra landscape, amid the coffee plantations and very tall forests of a very cold climate.

I would say that fieldwork in this village, called Zacatipan, was the most moving personal experience of my life. I learned to really communicate and have emotional attachments with people of a very different culture. I learned that human beings can live in an extraordinarily very self-sufficient way, because the people in the village could make most of their agricultural tools, household furniture and utensils, dress materials, and all the objects that they needed, from their immediate local natural environment. I didn't know that you could live in such a simple way, and at the same time in such a culturally rich way. They have a high culture with a wealth of norms, rituals, stories and art and crafts that are still being transmitted and that give children an extraordinary creativity.

I also discovered a highly structured society, much more complex socially and politically than what the national Mexican society thought Indian societies were capable of building. I remember I grappled for months to arrive at the concept of “selective perception” to explain the unfairness and inequality in perceptions of Indians in the Mexican imaginary. I wrote my M.A. dissertation on this village, and the title of it was *Economy and Society in a Nuaat Village*. And I have continued to cultivate Nuaat as a beautiful language.

Having finished that, I went back to London, as promised. I then spent the next six years going to and fro from London to Mexico. And in London I was very enthusiastic. I was overwhelmed with the great legacy of anthropologists, like Bronislaw Malinowski, Raymond Firth, and the whole school of thought of English social anthropology. In contrast to cultural anthropology, the former seemed to me the best way to understand a society like the one I had just been living in in the Sierra of Puebla. So I studied with Lucy Mair, with Julian Pitt-Rivers, with Jean Lafontaine, with Maurice Bloch, with Ian Lewis and so many others. But I also had many friends in Cambridge, and Oxford, and other schools of anthropology.

I discovered then that debating intellectually was not only a question of language but of discourse. Downhearted, I went to see my tutor, Anthony Forge, saying I could understand the words that were used in debate in classes but I could not understand the meaning of what they were saying. He patted me in the back, saying “Schlosser, it will come, it will come.” One very memorable occasion I remember was the conference that Claude Levi-Strauss gave at the Bodleian Library, circa 1971, to which we all flocked because he was just beginning to be graciously read by English academics. I remember it was very difficult for me to understand what he was saying because I had just arrived in London, and I found that I could understand the words he was using but not the meaning he was

conveying. So I spent the first three months with a new intellectual space in my mind in which all the words I was reading floated freely and chaotically until finally, little by little, I was able to build the cognitive structure needed to connect circuits of words into ideas. I must say that taught me very much to about the dynamics of culture and about the difficulties of intercultural dialogue. You cannot translate cognition. Words give you a mere speck of what they are meant to mean in the vast context of cognitive circuitry. So the only way intercultural dialogue works is by putting in place the sentiment of wanting to understand other cultures, knowing that words are only specks of a broader canvas which cannot be described.

I had decided to do my research on rural-urban migration and went back to Mexico to look for work. I was stopped in the hallway of the National Institute of Anthropology and History by a director calling out “President [Luis] Echeverría wants to know where all these *Mariás* are coming from.” So I did the specific study that President Echeverría wanted, because he sincerely wanted to help these migrant Mazahua Indian women—and he did—dressed in their traditional dress, something very unusual at the time, who were invading the sidewalks of Mexico City to sell fruit. I began the research in a region about 300 kilometers from Mexico and found the first signs of a massive rural out-migration flow that has now overflowed into the United States. My study showed the increasing deficit of farming families’ income, including the poorest Indian groups, because development policy was subsidizing urban and industrial growth by keeping the price of maize down through maize imports, thereby bankrupting the subsistence rural economy.

What was happening was that urban growth in the 1950s and 1960s had created jobs for rural migrants, giving them economic and social mobility. But this stopped working by the end of the 1960s because there were many more migrants—rural migrants—than urban jobs available. Migrants were no

longer able to find jobs in industry, so they went into the service sector—especially the informal sector, in what was then called the tertiarization and informalization of the economy

Well, the *Marías* were this very visible, “folkloric” segment of the informal sector. When I did further research, I found that they actually belonged to an army of informal street sellers, most of whom were –again—not perceived in the urban culture, because there was nothing exceptional about them. But these Indian women, the *Marías*, were perceived because they were dressed in their colorful dress, active and, in fact, defiant. I was able to show, in fact, that their street selling was the most rational and profitable activity in the context of widespread urban unemployment. And then it’s a very long story. I won’t go into more of the details.

I then went back to LSE and proposed, as the main topic for my Ph.D. dissertation, the study of the rural-urban Mazahua migration to Mexico City. By the time I finished my dissertation, in 1975, I could predict that rural outmigration would be one of the most important phenomena for the future of Mexican development after the 1970s.

At the same time, when I started the study of the *Marías*, I was accepted by Rodolfo Stavenhagen in the new sociology department he was starting at the Colégio de México. Stavenhagen was very involved in advancing the theory and practice of rural development and Indian identities. So he led a group of us anthropologists in a movement of advocacy for Indian cultures. In 1975, the personal interest of President Echeverría led to the holding of the first Indian congress in Mexican history, with very curious results. All previous Indianist congresses had been organized and chaired by government functionaries of the National Indian Institute, as was this one. But a group of us young anthropologists who were in the congress began saying to the Indians, “This is your congress. Why don’t you chair the meetings? Why aren’t you the ones writing the reports?”

We hadn't foreseen the success of our agit-prop. On the very next day, the functionaries waited and waited for the Indians to appear in the meeting rooms but none came. Everyone started asking, "Well, where are they?" They were, in fact, sitting and discussing by the side of the lake, the Lake of Patzcuaro. They had decided to convene a meeting exclusively of Indians so they could decide how they wanted to conduct their congress. This, I can tell you, was unheard of at that time in Mexico.

I was working especially with the Indian women. When they came back to the meeting, they demanded to chair the session. I remember I was asked by the woman who would chair the meeting to sit next to her. She kept asking, "Now what do I do?" I said, "Now, they raise their hand and you tell one by one when they can speak." But the Indian women began to stand up and in trembling voices and an awkward Spanish blurted out their complaints. "Now what do I do?" "I will write down the main points that have been mentioned so you can present this as a report." It was a first time they conducted their own sessions. That was fantastic.

In 1978 I published a booklet entitled "The Challenge of Cultural Pluralism." In 1983 the Mexican government officially declared that Mexico was a "pluricultural nation." The Indian movement diversified; groups split along party lines; some Indians became government officials, some became professional agitators. In the 1980s some in the movement radicalized, calling for an "Indian anthropology" as the "real" one against "mestizo anthropology," but the whole debate of whether Indians were better interpreters of their own culture blew up and finally slowly disappeared in the 1990s as interpretive anthropology broke down the neat barriers between norms, dissidence and alterity.

In the 1970s a different movement, yet similar in many aspects that I was active in, was women's liberation. It arose and grew out the creeping perception we women had of being ignored and marginalized in leading and taking decisions, yet being equally tortured, imprisoned and killed in 1968. We were never listened to in the assemblies. Women were simply not given the floor, and we were not expected to have any ideas or to be able to express them. So feminism, sparked by the second wave in the U.S and U.K. spread very quickly in Mexico among those of us who began to perceive the inequalities within the revolution. We began working in small *grupos de concientización*, as they were called. We organized meetings; we started the first ever Mexican feminist journal, *Fem*, which became the axis of the history of feminism in Mexico.

I had gotten very interested in women and development after I had found that the majority of rural migrants in Mexico were women. But when in Latin American meetings I insisted that tertiarization and informalization were a predominantly female phenomenon I got benevolent smiles and unfunny jokes. Importantly, at a time when sociologists and demographers were carrying out surveys on the basis of individuals' responses, I was able to show that out-migration patterns were based on family strategies, not individual preferences. As the farming families' deficit increased they sent out offspring in a relay migration pattern. Preference was given to sending out daughters, who could always get jobs as "servants,"—that is, domestic workers in the cities, although many times under horrendous conditions—rather than sons, who were needed for agricultural work.

Then I got the Fulbright-Hays Scholarship in 1978. I was invited to come to teach at Rutgers University in New Jersey. So I gave a course on Latin American development, on anthropology, and on women's studies. I remember how struck I was at the students' inability to examine historical patterns

or to theorize. But I met some wonderful people and enjoyed the freedom of everyday life for women there. Then I went back to Mexico. What else would be relevant?

TGW: I wonder if I could just probe one thing here. You mentioned activism and being politicized. You mentioned research. You just talked about teaching courses at Rutgers, and you have been in and out of academia. Are these three poles equally important to you? Or do you see these as separate kinds of activities? That is, teaching, research, advocacy. Or are these false distinctions for you?

LA: That's a very good question. You must remember that in the 1970s there was great creativity in Latin American sociological and anthropological research—social science. It was a time when a great many thinkers were questioning many of the traditional models for analyzing development. And among the things that were criticized was the kind of research that was based exclusively on observation by outsiders. There was a very strong movement in Latin America of *investigación acción*. I remember I was invited to a meeting in Colombia by Orlando Fals Borda, one of the main intellectual leaders of this movement.

I believe that, for the social sciences, being engaged and involved is very important. However, I came to realize that one cannot and perhaps should not do it all at the same time. What I did was to have periods where I was fully engaged, say, in the Indian movement, or the feminist movement, and then a period where I was totally devoted to scholarly work, and where I tried to be as rigorous as possible in analyzing the data. This was important because I remember a discussion I once had with a sociologist that I greatly admired, who said, “Lourdes, we must produce ideology from the Third World,” and I answered, “No, we must produce excellent research for the Third World.” There was a

difference. There still is. I believe in science. I am convinced that it is ideas and perceptions that are the motor that changes society.

TGW: Do you think, from your various observations as an academic, as a policy researcher, as an activist, as a UN official—do you see that theoretical ideas, to use something that we are fond of in the academy—are understood or can work their way into documents? Or do they have to be processed in a way that is more readily understandable by folks? I am curious about the impact of theoretical literature, largely abstract literature, on the policy arena and on activists. How does this transpire? What is more effective in this context?

LA: I think there is a false distinction between the abstract and the practical, which has been very deleterious to the work of United Nations in the last two decades. People criticize the United Nations as just bringing out abstract declarations. But such resolutions have changed the world as much as all other actions it has initiated. I think this is a false problem, because any practice always has a theory behind it. It is not always necessary to make the theory explicit. Most of the time it shouldn't be, because it takes a long training to be able to understand the complexities that are inherent to any kind of theory. But what must be done is to formulate a practice that adheres very rigorously to high theoretical standards.

And because this false problem has been put forth, I think the United Nations has been hampered, especially lately with having to do more action and thinking. So many actions have no—how can I put it? Actions are not well-grounded. Actions then become simply an immediate response to narrow interests, rather than a well-thought-out response to historical challenges. That's how I would put it.

TGW: That's very intriguing. In speaking about research and ideas you have, throughout your career, been in a variety of contexts. I just wonder, do you see a comparative advantage—I'm bringing up an economics term, here—a comparative advantage in doing the kind of research where we're talking about fundamental ideas? Are there some things that you can do better in the Colégio de Mexico, in a university context, some things that you can do better in a policy tank, in Sussex, and some things that you can do better in the ILO (International Labour Organization) or UNESCO (UN Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization)? Is there a division of labor, or do good people find themselves in all of these places? I'm just thinking about your own work. Do you think that you've done better research and writing in one of these contexts than another?

LA: I think there has to be a division of labor. You do need pure intellectual research. Think of the way in which Claude Levi-Strauss, who did not do very much fieldwork nor was engaged in social action, changed our perception of societies. For this reason, universities, such as the National University of Mexico (UNAM) is essential in terms of an institution that looks at the long term in developing very precise instruments of understanding. But then you need an institution, like the Institute of Development Studies in Sussex, where the theoretical conclusions can be translated into elements to guide policy. There is a translation there. And finally, there must be the institutions, such as UNESCO, where such ideas that guide policy are negotiated among many governments and civil society groups so that the end result is a consensual outlook on actions.

Now, not everybody can do the three types of activities. I have been very fortunate in that I have been invited to do the three kinds of activities. Therefore, I find that one has to begin by doing the theoretical analysis, because only then can one understand how difficult it is to capture reality in ideas without leaving things aside that, when you go into practice, won't distort what you want to do. So

you have to start with the very abstract thinking, with the basic concepts, and know the problems that any definition of concepts has in order to translate that into policy elements. But you can do that in a much more rigorous way if you already know what the complexity is.

Then, when you take those elements of policy to be discussed by politicians, or functionaries, or practitioners, it is much easier to guide the discussion, and especially to point out the pitfalls so that the end result would really be practical in the sense of being efficient and efficacious. The problem that I see is that there has been a denial of the need for theoretical thinking in the last two decades, and an insistence that we should only respond to demand, to what people want, or to what people say they want. And of course, we have to be responsive to what people want, because it's the only way to get a project to function. But at the same time, we must realize that what people say they want is not a statement to be taken as a simple statement. There is a great complexity to what people say they want, which the researcher alone cannot figure out. It is the researcher, with the practitioner, with the local people. It's that dialogue among the three that can help come to a practice that is really useful.

TWG: Now that you have spent time in these three worlds, and as you say, moving back and forth among them, how would you describe the way that your own ideas have changed over the last thirty years or so? What were the things that you thought were absolutely certain in 1968 and then fast-forward thirty years to 1998—in between you've played a variety of roles and done a variety of research. How have your own ideas changed in that period?

LA: Could I just very quickly go back to what happened in the 1980s, because I would have to refer to that.

TGW: Sure.

LA: Just to finish the life story, see. In 1981, I was invited as a Fellow at the Institute of Development Studies at Sussex, and in 1982, I got a Guggenheim fellowship to do research in Third World countries. I was able to go India, to Senegal, to Israel, and to Costa Rica. That gave me a worldview. That's when my ideas changed very much and I wanted to apply them. So I accepted a position in a totally new, wildly innovative, National Museum of Popular Cultures. Working with very creative young people, I went through the exercise of translating ideas into a visual idiom, which for me was quite fascinating. But I could do it in a much more informed way because I knew of all the theories.

Later on I wanted to go back to doing research, this time on social perceptions to global environmental change, with fieldwork in the Lacandón Rainforest. The fascinating thing there is that we could register how local Indian and mestizo migrants, recently arrived in the rainforest began to formulate their perceptions and positions about the incoming environmentalist concerns. While doing this research I was designated director of the anthropological research institute of the National University. That was the first time that I had to face institutional politics in an intellectually free ambiance, which are very ebullient at the National University of Mexico, as in many other countries.

Soon after, I was elected president of the International Union of Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences, which gave me an opportunity I relished—that of leading the debate on the issues and priorities, world-wide, of these sciences. In 1993, I organized the Union's International Congress, which was attended by more than 5,000 anthropologists and was great fun. Soon after I was invited to be a member of the United Nations independent World Commission on Culture and Development. And a few months later, I was invited to be assistant-director-general for culture of UNESCO whereby I had direct responsibility of nearly 400 projects on culture that UNESCO had

around the world. That's when I had to learn to do all these translations, or rather all these interpretations in the midst of intensive diplomatic negotiations.

TGW: I see, you're back to the school of interpreters.

LA: That's right, from theory to policy, to actually conducting negotiations to establish consensus about policy actions—this, at an international level. Now, having participated in so many different kinds of knowledge and action environments in which I learned how ideas are related to action, I will say that the idea that I had since 1968, and which I still adhere to, is that we need to have a vision in order to move society in a direction that will improve the way people live.

Working at the global level changed how I have come to realize that people are prone to the same kinds of problems of disorganization, lack of cooperation, narrow interests, incapacity to look at the long term. In all nation-states, in all cultural groups, in all ethnic groups people tend to react in similar ways. So it's not just a question of substituting one group for another in terms of the structure of power. It's a question of reorganizing the structure of power so that different groups are able to participate, but demanding that people of all these groups behave in a way that is ethical, that respects other people, and that respects human rights. And in fact, I believe that this is our most immediate task now, in the world today, because we have lost the vision which gave us the meaning and purpose of international actions, and we have to reconstruct this.

TGW: I wonder, since we have moved ahead to culture and development, whether you could tell me what you mean by culture and development, and why you think this approach is important to the way that we frame international cooperation.

LA: First of all, I would like to define "culture," because it's the word of many meanings. My own definition is that it is the constant flow of meanings that people create, transmit, and transform,

that allow them to build relationships with others, with family, with kin, with other citizens, which allows them to participate in economic activities, which allows them to create symbolic representations that, in turn, give them a feeling of security and certainty. This is, for me, what culture is. I see development as also the development of this idea of human life. Instead, development, since the 1950s, has been defined mainly by economists in terms of economics and development. And economics is the science of exchange, of the exchange of goods. I believe that human life is more than the exchange of goods, and that in fact the meaning that this exchange has, is subject to the cultural conventions that give it form.

Therefore, if you think of development exclusively in terms of what people exchange in terms of goods, you are losing most of what is valuable for human lives. Now, I began to realize this way back from my very first fieldwork in the sierra, because there I found a village where people were very poor in economic standards, where they lived mostly off their immediate environment but, at the same time, were extremely rich in their cultural, spiritual, ritual, and social life. That was when I began to realize that, with these mainstream economic growth theories—in Mexico as well as in other countries—we were gaining something, but we were losing a lot more. I say this not to justify compensating poverty with cultural richness but rather to point out that economic wealth, as we are seeing more and more in the contemporary world is now accompanied by social, cultural and spiritual poverty.

From the very beginning, from the 1970s, when I was doing fieldwork in rural villages in Mexico, I kept asking. “Why can’t we have both? Why can’t we keep the best of what human beings have created—that is culture—while improving the way people exchange goods, so that they can have a better standard of life? Why can’t we have both?” And I think the whole premise of my professional work has been to work towards achieving this recombination of factors of life.

So, from the beginning of my professional work, I began arguing in the 1970s in favor of the right of Indian peoples to keep their cultures, in favor of women having the right to define their own lives, in terms of Mexico having the right to define itself as a nation so people will come together and cooperate. But I have found that, as the saying goes in Spanish, “*el camino del infierno está sembrado de buenas intenciones.*”

TGW: “The road to hell is paved with good intentions.”

LA: Yes, exactly. All we can do is to keep trying to improve our lot and to keep experimenting with many different kinds of projects. I remember everything from setting up productive units for rural women, and sewing cooperatives for women migrants, to training Indians to write the history of their villages, to bringing to the National Museum of Popular Cultures the productions of artisans and local artists. So many experiments, and so many of them successful, while others were unable to really achieve their aims, for different reasons. In the end, it had to do more with the kind of mental structures that people had, which pushed them towards very narrow interests, or questions of power, or questions of personal status, that made it very difficult for projects to get ahead.

TGW: I am interested when you say something like, “Development is more than the exchange of goods.” Now, that seems so obvious. Yet, at one time, as you’ve just mentioned, it wasn’t obvious. How did this quite unusual notion—if we go back to the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s—how did this penetrate the UN’s agenda? Where did it come from, and why? It now seems obvious, but what changed it from being off the radar screen to being central to our concerns, or at least more central?

LA: I would say that Latin American intellectuals played a very important role in bringing many of these ideas on culture into the United Nations, from Fernando Henrique Cardoso, to Rodolfo Stavenhagen, to Pablo González Casanova. The emphasis was on endogenous development, on

collective movements, on center-periphery relationships, which worked out more in political and cultural terms. But it is not by coincidence that this thrust came from Third World politicians and thinkers, with strong support from the more enlightened European countries. So many of the mainstream development ideas now being taken up by the World Bank and other economic agencies originated in research and in schemes in developing countries. Just to mention a few: action research, poor people's loan schemes, the need to take into account social organization now called "social capital" or "institutions", the predominance of women in the pervasive influence of cultural norms and habits, the need for a responsive and accountable government now called "governance." All these questions that were debated in developing countries in the 1960s and 1970s became mainstream in U.N. agencies in the 1980s. This is why it has been such a waste of time for the Washington consensus to have re-imposed narrow economic policies in the 1990s, only to begin to re-introduce, once again, questions of governance, institutions and culture in the last few years.

The path this took at the United Nations can be traced through major international conferences. The Women's international conferences starting with the U.N. World Conference of the International Women's Year in Mexico in 1975; the International Population Conferences (World Population Conference, Second World Population Conference, and the International Conference on Population and Development); the UNESCO *Mondiacult* Intergovernmental Conference on Cultural Policies held in Mexico in 1983. ILO at the time began to incorporate concerns about gender and culture into their projects. In 1982 I participated in an ILO rural development project for women, organized by Mme. Zubeida Ahmad, where the questions of social cooperation, women and development were brought into the analysis. By the mid-1980s, many of the governments of developing countries had become convinced that culture was one way of insisting on endogenous development. The question of culture

was linked to the idea that different countries should define development in different ways. It was especially developing countries who were finding that many of the imported development programs were not functioning, and among the reasons being given for this were cultural patterns.

I also believe that the conferences of the Society for International Development (SID), as well as one of its programs, the North-South Dialogue, were very important spaces in which the development community met to bring together all the strands of development thinking and where I helped bring in the question of culture. I remember, in 1989, at the SID conference in India, Louis Emmerij had invited me to present a paper which I later reworked for the meeting of the 25th anniversary of the OECD (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development) in Paris. I entitled it, “On Cultural and Social Sustainability,” which I believe was the first time that such concepts have been put forth in that way. I argued that there could be no sustainability—either environmental or economic—unless culture and social factors were taken into account in development.

In 1988, after a lot of working with governments, and lobbying, the Group of 77 (G77), and other countries in the United Nations, proposed a Decade on Culture and Development, 1998-1997. UNESCO was the agency responsible for implementing this program. During its first few years, this program fostered many small projects, in many countries, but this was not pulling together into a new formulation about culture and development. That’s when, I believe, the Nordic countries, who proposed that a World Commission on Culture and Development be organized, through a resolution of the U.N. General Assembly. This independent commission was chaired by Mr. Javier Pérez de Cuellar, and I had the honor of being one of its members. As you know, there were very distinguished people on it, starting with Mahbub ul Haq, who was my very admired friend, Celso Furtado, Yoro Fall, Nikita Mikailkov, Elizabeth Jelin, Keith Griffin and others. After a year or so Mr. Pérez de Cuellar

asked Mr. Federico Mayor if I could be in charge of the secretariat, which I did. And there's a whole inside story to that, but I don't think I'll go into the details. And you've spoken with him, right?

TGW: Yes, I have.

LA: He told me. It was a very interesting experience, a very difficult one, as all commissions are, always.

TGW: I was the research director for the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty (ICISS), which just presented its report. So there's a similar behind-the-scenes story.

LA: Behind-the-scenes, yes. And there's the whole history of the commission, realpolitik in terms of political currents and institutional trends. You don't need me to tell you that.

TGW: You mentioned developing countries pushing this, but then you mentioned the Nordic countries, and you mentioned the North-South Dialogue. What exactly were the politics of this? Is it accurate to say that there was a difference between northern and southern views on culture and development? Was there really a clash of sorts, or did this just more or less bubble up from the South, as it now seems to be generally accepted? Unlike other issues in which there really was a total non-meeting of the minds, is this an issue that was not as divisive?

LA: Could we stop a moment?

TGW: Sure.

TGW: This is the beginning of tape number two, Tom Weiss with Lourdes Arizpe in New York, where we are discussing North-South divides on cultural development.

LA: In the 1960s, with the writings of Frantz Fanon, and other authors, including Albert Camus, decolonization began to be seen also as reinvigorating cultures repressed during the colonial experience. The idea was that any endogenous development had to be based on local or national

cultures. At that time, it was still national cultures. So as part of the advocacy for decolonization, some leaders of Third World countries, such as Amílcar Cabral, also spoke of the need to decolonize the mind. This converged with the movement of the *négritude*, led by Leopold Senghol and Aimé Césaire in the Caribbean, and broadly, with the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) and the Bandung conference (Asian-African Conference).

So as part of the ideology of the Third World, the idea was put forth that culture had to be one of the important factors in the models that were being proposed for decolonized countries. I have already mentioned that, in Latin America, this view developed through dependency theory, and through what was then called the historical-structural perspective in the social sciences. At the end of the 1970s, Edward Said brought out his very famous book, called *Orientalism*, which further showed the need to dismantle the colonial intellectual structures that had been developed in the West to look at other cultures. Anthropology was central in this discussion. It had been accused of being the mother of colonialism but I always argued that it was also the aunt of national liberation struggles.

There was a general sense, then, that, in order to have a development which really would benefit the populations in the Third World, culture had to be taken into account. Importantly, the idea was to counter some of the proposals that had been put forth since the 1960s, that the Third World could not develop because their cultures were an obstacle to development.

TGW: Earlier, you mentioned a couple of process issues, and I would like to go back because they have come up in many of the interviews. You mentioned the World Commission on Culture and Development. But I'm interested in commissions more generally as a possible vehicle to push ideas out—not necessarily theoretical ideas, but in this interpretation or translation process, to put an issue before the community of states, before NGOs (nongovernmental organizations), before private citizens,

et cetera. Is it possible to generalize about these independent commissions and their utility? Some people see them as high-flying jet-setters getting together in exotic spots. Other people see them as useful devices. I just wondered about your own view.

LA: My view is that the World Commission on Culture and Development made an extraordinary achievement, which was to organize the international debate on culture. When we met the very first time in UNESCO in March 1993, and I could hear the diversity of viewpoints and positions among the commissioners, and among the honorary members of the commission, I thought, “We will never get a report out.” So I was very surprised in finding that, very slowly, after quite a large number of meetings through three years, including nine consultations in different regions, we all ended up converging on a basic set of principles to guide policy recommendations on culture and development. This was certainly not easy, but in the end it was hammered out. Mostly thanks to Mr. Pérez de Cuellar’s extraordinary political skills in leadership, because he was able to be responsive to the proposals, and he was able to galvanize us into coming to some sort of consensus, and to the excellent intellectual work of a group of young people in the secretariat.

But I must say that, on the side of anthropologists, there was a recognition that the anthropological viewpoint had strongly influenced the commission’s report, because we were able to give a broader definition of culture than had hitherto been used in defining cultural programs in the United Nations. Already in UNESCO, in 1946, when the very first projects on culture were defined, they had to do almost exclusively with the arts, with cultural heritage, and with crafts, and the need for protection for artists. Even though, in terms of projects, UNESCO in the 1970s and 1980s, did bring in a much broader range of topics on culture, such as cultural policies and indigenous cultures, there had never been a formulation which linked culture to sustainability, democracy, human rights and gender

equity, encompassing many more social and political aspects than had been included up to then in cultural programs.

TGW: So let's spend a moment then on conferences. You mentioned the conference in Mexico in 1982 on culture, but you also mentioned the one in 1975 on women, which was probably more visible. The same question: As a vehicle for the transmission of ideas, or the publicizing of ideas, there seems to be quite a division of views amongst our interviewees as to whether or not global ad hoc conferences—Stockholm (UN Conference on the Human Environment) and Rio (UN Conference on Environment and Development) on the environment, Mexico City and Cairo (UN Conference on Population and Development) on women, Bucharest (World Population Conference), and on and on—whether these are important? Or possibly, the first time they are important and afterwards they are not. How do you see these mayor UN undertakings for the transmission of ideas? Are they important?

LA: I believe they're very, very important, because it allows for a dialogue between actors that would otherwise never have access to the whole array of ideas and positions around one issue. A negotiation process is set up much before the actual conferences, whereby the basic ideas are hammered out and differences can be clearly formulated. Arguing over differences clearly laid out is important, because then you can see where you have to develop new concepts or new strategies, and where you have to negotiate, in order to come to some sort of consensus.

Now, I believe that the United Nations is driven by the art of the possible, just as politics is defined as the art of the possible. But what these global conferences have done is push forward, as far as possible. And in many ways, they push forward in a way that leads the world in a given direction. If this had not been done, I do believe that economic globalization would not have been possible,

because you need some sort of larger, overarching view of the connections between nations, between peoples, in order to set up trade systems, or telecommunications systems, or whatever. If you do not have that, if everything becomes regionalized and localized to the extent that it fragments, you cannot have globalization. And you cannot have economic globalization if you do not have some sort of globalization of the minds. And that you can only do through culture. World conferences create a culture of seeking world consensus.

In fact, as I have said in some papers, I believe that globalization has advanced far more in terms of culture than in terms of economy. Not in the sense that a global culture is being created. No, we will never evolve “a” global culture, given the intrinsic creativity of people. But we will have certain global agreements about basic outlooks that are totally necessary if people from different regions of the world are going to understand each other. The great risk in the world today is regionalizing too much, because then you lose the capacity of the peoples in the world, or of the United Nations, of solving disagreements peacefully. I think that, unless you have that avenue for coming to agreements, the only other outcome will be wars—again, and again, and again.

TGW: I was going to ask this earlier, but now I am coming back to it. You said that globalization moved toward—that a convergence on basic outlooks is moving faster than economic globalization. Maybe it’s only my pop understanding of culture at this moment in time. But are not Asian values and cultural relativism a sort of downside of taking local culture seriously, and moving against the kind of universal or quasi-universal agreements that, I think, you seem to imply are necessary to avoid the kinds of conflicts we have seen in the 1990s, in particular?

LA: I would strongly argue that respect for other cultures does not imply discarding a global vision. This is what I have very forcefully insisted on in all my work, and in the kind of intellectual

direction that I tried to give at UNESCO. We need both. One of the major achievements of the West was to have created a political framework that stands over and above cultural and religious diversity, thus allowing freedom of choice. I entirely agree that it is, in fact, dangerous to idealize local cultures, or to think that whatever is proposed by an ethnic group, or a religious group, or a cultural minority is positive, always. No.

This is why, in the World Commission, several of us strongly argued that cultures must be respected, but only if they, themselves, have values of respect for other cultures. Otherwise, we would fall into a cultural relativism where anything goes. This would mean that cultures that discriminate against women, that do not stop feminine infanticide, that do not give children education, that destroy the cultural heritage of others—that they must be tolerated. And we cannot tolerate those who are intolerant.

What has happened in the last decade, I would say, is that there has been too much insistence that local people are always right, to the detriment of thinking that people who think in universal terms are also right. In a world that is rapidly shrinking I believe we urgently need universal standards in everything. How can business thrive if the same standards are not applied everywhere? How can we cooperate for sustainability without common standards and goals?

It is a question of negotiating how the two come together. And there are all the mediating levels of the nation-state, of the regional unions or trade agreements, and of international institutions. This is why I think it's so risky that the United Nations has been left aside on so many questions in the last few years, because the United Nations is there to create the spaces so that the different powers can negotiate. If this space is forced to become subordinate to other powers, then there is no longer any

space for negotiations to take place. The greatest risk for the world today is that negotiation becomes impossible.

TGW: I'm going to quote you on that.

LA: I would also like to add that keeping and developing a world vision is highly dependent on continuous creativity in the spheres of thought that give us elements for that. Thus, culture becomes very important, not only in itself, as a representation of a given people, but also in terms of allowing the possibility of understanding between different cultures. And social science is a basic tool for this understanding. By undermining science, or by wanting to subordinate science to political or other standards, the whole enterprise of creating a livable world collapses. You need science because science tries to be objective, and it has been able to be more objective than, in any case, any other political philosophy or religious doctrine. So unless you keep such an objective intention in intellectual thought, you will not be able to build the political arrangements so that different actors can negotiate.

TGW: A couple of themes have come up. You've mentioned earlier women and gender, and culture. I'm wondering, do these two intersect? Do they clash on occasion? You wrote something that intrigued me, "the culture paradoxes of gender." Is it possible to have a gendered approach to culture, or in fact does this move against some of the kinds of more universal framing of issues that you have argued are important? How do these two interests of yours come together?

LA: I think it is very clear that the construction of gender in every society is a cultural convention. There are obviously—I would not deny it—biological, physiological, even psychological predispositions that are different between women and men. But the way in which these differences are constructed socially will depend on the culture of every society. In that sense, cultural analysis is a universal instrument of understanding, because through culture you can see exactly how gender is

constructed, how “Indian-ness” is constructed, how race is constructed, how sexual preference discrimination is constructed. You can see, through culture, how the differences between people--and there will always be differences of all kinds—become socially meaningful.

TGW: In this process, you were a member of the DAWN (Development Alternatives for Women for a New Era) steering committee. I just wondered how you evaluate the vision and purpose, and ultimate success of this network of feminists.

LA: What we were trying to do in DAWN is to make a series of points about the lives of women in Third World countries that we thought were not being understood in the North. We all collaborated with feminists in the North who were very active, and with whom we developed very many of the strategies and ideas that were put forth on women and development. Still, there were some points that we wished to make. I think DAWN was very successful in presenting ideas and pushing the debate forward. Several books were published. Meetings were held in different countries.

There were certain exceptional qualities to DAWN. First of all, women were represented from all developing regions of the world. Secondly, most were both researchers and development practitioners. So we were able to build a new perspective showing how the conditions of women’s lives in Third World countries required different development strategies.

TGW: In light of your various wanderings around the UN system, I wonder whether you could characterize the relationships among agencies. As one reads the literature, there are lots of terms used about turf consciousness, and tensions, and clashes, et cetera, et cetera. All of that, I think, is quite real. I just wondered, from the perspective of someone who has not really been a permanent official, but who has spent chunks of time here, there, and elsewhere, when do you think these differences in

perspectives, these tensions, these concerns with one's section of the pie are actually productive in terms of producing ideas and thoughts—or are they counterproductive?

LA: I would have to think about that. I think, in theory, that the division of labor between the United Nations agencies could work very well if the relationships and critiques between them could lead to improving the work on the agencies. I think this was the case, I believe—I was not there, obviously—in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s when UNESCO, for example, was very complementary to what the United Nations did, and so was the World Bank. They each had their particular tasks.

This began breaking down in the 1980s, I believe, as UNESCO was so strongly hit because of some of its policies. When this was followed by a permanent campaign against UNESCO's work in the 1980s and 1990s, I think this was very deleterious to the work of the institution. Then the complementarity broke down with different agencies competing in doing the same thing. In the 1990's UNESCO started doing humanitarian work and other kinds of work that were really the mandate of the United Nations headquarters, but also when the World Bank began to do work in education and culture that are not the tasks of a bank, and which became much more instrumental for one particular neoliberal model of globalization.

So the whole humanitarian vision of the United Nations, which should have prevailed in all the agencies, suddenly was concentrated only in some of them, like UNDP (UN Development Programme), UNICEF (UN Children's Fund), UNESCO, where that should have been the vision also of the World Bank, or of the IMF (International Monetary Fund). So, instead of having a division of labor, you have a segmentation and a grabbing—what is the word in English for *arrancar*. Grasping?

TGW: I think that's grasping, or wrestling, probably.

LA: Yes, a wrestling about certain turf areas, which does not help, which hinders the work of the agencies. But I also see something else, which is that, in the 1950s, the work on economic development was first formulated at the United Nation headquarters so the debate on theories of development stayed in New York. What happened there, I think, is that the nineteenth century disciplinary division between economics and the other social sciences—anthropology, sociology—became the blueprint for the division of labor between agencies. Economic development stayed in New York, and more cultural scientific and educational aspects of development stayed in UNESCO, with very little communication between them. That was unfortunate, because there should have been much more multidisciplinary work between these different social sciences. The International Social Science Council, of which I am now candidate for president, for example, created by UNESCO back in the 1950s, is housed in UNESCO in Paris, but did not have very much connection in terms of research and debates with what was happening with development programs in the UN Headquarters.

TGW: You mentioned that you were working on the commission when you were asked to become the assistant-director-general at UNESCO. What was your reaction on becoming an official in what some people saw, or see, as an enormously heavy and sleepy bureaucracy? Were you impressed with the quality of people there, in terms of their ideas, their commitment to what was going on? Or did you find it sort of an unproductive place? Could you characterize the kinds of people you worked with? Do you think these were the right people for the right jobs, for the most part?

LA: I was very impressed with many of the people of UNESCO, because of their commitment, their conviction, and their sense of mission. Many of them I had met in the 1970s and 1980s, so there was this whole generation, including my generation of 1968, that, paraphrasing Virginia Woolf, I would

say, “We galloped through life behind ideals.” She actually said ideas, not ideals. We were all working with a purpose, and these people were very impressive. They have been the pillars of UNESCO.

Then there were other people who were well-intentioned, but perhaps did not have the training, or the interest in developing projects more. And then there were those who were there because it was Paris. So you had all sorts. What was very interesting to me is that, since I am a professional ethnographer, I could not help doing the ethnography of the house of UNESCO. I was especially struck at first because so many of the ambassadors told me, “Oh, these bureaucrats in UNESCO are terrible. They don’t work. They don’t do anything. They are inefficient.” Then I started knowing my colleagues more, and what I found is that some of them were terribly overworked, more like saints because they could accept conditions of work which would have driven anyone else out of their minds, and they were very capable of bringing out the work that could be accepted consensually by 186 member-states! This is a huge feat.

Then I started talking to my colleagues and they say, “Well, the problem is that having the delegations in Paris, breathing down our necks, makes it impossible to work well,” because there were all these narrow interests that were interfering. My analysis indicated that the inefficiency of the bureaucracy was inherent structure to a governance structure in which political interests were paramount over quality, substance and fairness. I used to say that working in UNESCO was like working in a government in which all the political parties are in power at the same time. This is why the question of who the director-general is, is so important. He can deflect or allow the pursuit of narrow political or personal interests.

What is extraordinary is that, in spite of this, UNESCO has been and still is very influential through very important programs—for example, the World Heritage List. Significantly, this is why it

has such a good reputation in developing countries and in many developed ones, together with UNDP, contrary to the World Bank and the IMF. But the main problem with UNESCO is that there are three distinct ideas about what the institution should do. European countries, as well as many other countries of the Americas and of Asia believe that UNESCO should devote itself primarily to international intellectual cooperation—that UNESCO should exercise moral and intellectual leadership in fostering the creation of ideas, and representations, and of fostering science and education to give a sense of direction to development. Countries with middle-income development needs, however, want UNESCO to produce development blueprints that they can apply in their countries. And countries with the greatest development needs want UNESCO to be a funding agency to compensate in areas where they have no resources to apply.

The debates about what the institution should do and the political currents moving stealthily through the house made negotiating programs very complex. To every vote there were some six floors of intentions which one had to know about and understand in order to help steer the way towards a consensus. Because that is the most important role of an international functionary—to help find strategies to dodge narrow political and personal interests and bullying tactics, to achieve the greatest good for the greatest number of people around the world.

TGW: I wonder whether I might try to build upon a comment you made earlier about your student days. I'm paraphrasing here: "We woke up one day and found out there were a lot of women in the room, but nobody was taking our voice seriously." I wondered whether you noticed any change between your initial period in the UN and the ILO days of the late 1970s and early 1980s, and in the mid-1990s to late-1990s? Was the decibel level, anyway, of women's voices louder? Was it taken

more seriously? What are the remaining problems within these bureaucracies and institutions in making the decibel levels about equal?

LA: I think one of the greatest achievements of the United Nations is to have helped demonstrate that people from all cultures of the world can work together. And this cultural pluralism of international institutions is never mentioned. This should be loudly celebrated! The simple fact that when people are given sufficient motivation, when they develop the conviction, they can work together and create an enabling environment. Furthermore, given this success of the United Nations—because it's not easy to have representation from 190 in an institution—not enough has been done in terms of recognizing that people can work together because they develop an institutional culture to work together. And this has had a demonstration effect for the rest of the world.

We should stress that one of the great contributions of the United Nations is to have created a culture of cooperation between different peoples of the world. This now includes, of course, women—the fact that women have come to work in UN institutions. Very importantly, in the 1970's you never found women in high-level posts within the United Nations and you have them now. However, women still tend to be pushed towards the more “womanly concerns” projects. But still, there has been great advance in this.

In most United Nations documents women and gender are now mentioned, although there is now an attempt to reverse history and leave them out. What has not changed is the fact that women continue to be marginalized, or they continue to be taken as tokens, when it comes down to the specific design and application of programs. I think this still happens. But let it be said that this not a specific problem of the United Nations. It's a specific problem of most institutions, either in governments or even local institutions. Women's participation is very new. Women still have to go through a learning

curve in leadership and administration and it will still take much more time for women to be recognized as equal partners.

TGW: So you do not see any major difference between the role of women within the United Nations and in many parts of the world. You don't see the United Nations as being ahead of others, on the forefront in any way?

LA: Oh, I think it has been ahead in including women. I definitely think it has been ahead. Just simply because of the fact of having these world conferences, it has had leadership in bringing the women's issue to the agendas. Oh, definitely.

TGW: Some people have argued that in the realm of ideas there is an important role for the United Nations in going against the grain, against the tide, in being a voice to call into question dominant orthodoxies. So, for example, there has been a criticism of the present Secretary-General when he puts out the Global Compact, because it actually plays into the hands of corporations when the role of the United Nations should be to take the voice of the powerless and to confront these dominant realities. How would you see the UN's main role in the world of ideas—as against the grain or trying to push new ideas?

LA: I don't think that's a good way to put it, because I think the United Nations, in terms of ideas, is the conscience of the world. It should be accountable to every person on the planet in terms of ensuring that the main principles on which any action is based, whether government, NGOs, corporations, local communities, that all these actions are guided by basic ethics of justice, equity and sustainability. And I think the United Nations has an extremely important role, because even though it brings out resolution after resolution, so that you can paper the whole building with them, as I've heard it said, these resolutions place a mirror in front of governments and people

I could see it in my own practice, when people from Mexico came to see me, saying, “Mexico has signed this convention, so we want to ask UNESCO to pressure our government to do what it has signed.” And I’ve seen it in many meetings, where the powerless Indian groups or women’s groups have actually taken documents from UNESCO, or from the United Nations, and presented these to the officials from their governments, and have forced their governments to be more accountable because there exists this document which has been signed and ratified by a majority of countries in the world, showing that this is the way that governments should behave, or corporations should behave, or men should behave.

I think in terms of ideas, that’s the most important role that the UN should play. It should not take sides, because in taking sides it falls into the lines of political parties. It should be above that, in the sense of creating a space where different political projects can be reflected, make their positions known, debate and face opponents. But there is something which is of a higher order, and it’s that higher order that gives the spirit of the United Nations which means to think for all, to think for the world. This means, necessarily trying to make the world more equal. If we lose that, then there is no more role for a United Nations.

TGW: I am interested that after a lengthy conversation, finally the word “NGO” came up. I am curious as to your reflection, both as an analyst on the outside as well as a former senior official within it—what role do you think NGOs have traditionally played and may play in the future in terms of helping to advance intellectual agendas, normative agendas, in and around the UN system?

LA: Also thinking in terms of ethnography, it is very interesting to see how the idea of NGOs has evolved since the 1960s, because when UNESCO was created, it was created not only as an intergovernmental agency, but also as an agency that had a civil society component through the national

UNESCO commissions. There you would have the writers, the thinkers, the artists, the artisans, all coming together for this great world dialogue. During the 1950s, in the 1960s, up to the 1970s, national commissions were very important in UNESCO. They had equal importance as government representation. But also, remember that government representatives in UNESCO at that time were all people who worked with ideas, art, science or education. Hence the very fruitful dialogue and creative programs.

Since the 1980s, when governments have insisted that UNESCO subordinate itself to the interests of governments, national commissions have lost much of their punch. This is not so much so the responsibility of UNESCO itself, but of the governments. In some countries, UNESCO commissions function extremely well—in the Nordic countries, in Japan, and others. But in other countries, the commissions are appointed by the minister of culture, or some other bureaucrat.

Today, younger constituencies, and constituencies in developing countries, have drifted off, so that what was the ideal institutional arrangement, whereby civil society had an equal representation as governments, has now been diluted. The result is that civil society cannot find avenues of expression. This is why one of the recommendations in our World Commission on Culture and Development was that thought should be given to creating some other kind of body within the United Nations that would represent peoples or civil societies of the world. I do believe we need them.

TGW: But as a separate unit in which civil society would be the ghetto of civil society versus trying to integrate governments and nongovernmental views? In looking for space or common ground, are there ways to bring these two together, as opposed to creating a separate chamber, or whatever you want to call it, for civil society?

LA: Well, you now have the ghetto of the governments. But as they have the money, they dictate the terms. But they have been doing a very bad job in the last few decades, both for development, or for peace. We are seeing the results now. If you see that in the last thirty years the ratio of wealth of the twenty percent richest people to the poorest twenty percent has doubled, you really wonder what all of these development institutions have done. So major changes have to be carried out. And the hope—I believe it is only a hope—is that by bringing in civil society, there will be more accountability of governments in terms of their actions. But there has to be more accountability of the powerful in bringing about more and more blatant structures of inequality.

TGW: Why did you leave UNESCO? Were you happy to get back to the fuzzy-headed world of academia? Why did you leave, and would you consider going back into the United Nations at some point?

LA: Excuse me, but it is out of the academia that all the theories and practices that currently drive the world have come. The worrying trend in the last decades is the lack of support for science and academia which is leading to a very fuzzy-headed world as we now see it.

I left UNESCO because I felt that what I could contribute to the institution was already there, and that after that, all I would be doing was pushing documents around the desk. But I also felt that I could not take responsibility for the cultural sector without being given the power of decision, the power to make fair decisions. So I thought it best to go back to my university in Mexico and to do the kind of writing and research that would help inform policy choices on culture and development.

TGW: After having been an official, how was your own research agenda altered? Were there things that you hadn't thought of before that suddenly became more important preoccupations? Did

you ask new questions as a result of an extended period in trying to translate ideas into policies? What did you do differently when you got back to Mexico as a result of having spent a half a decade in Paris?

LA: I think that what I gained in UNESCO was a realistic and global understanding of what is happening in the world today. For this opportunity, I am grateful to Mr. Federico Mayor. I also found that, in order to really understand what drives the world today, you have to understand all these different levels of power and negotiation that are going on every day, in every program, in every project that the United Nations carries out, but also in every government or NGO project.

What UNESCO gave me was a full understanding of the inner workings of contemporary societies. I was able to see not only the specific problems or research areas that have been developed in the social sciences, but also larger areas that have not been discovered by academic research yet. I could see more clearly that we have to reform not only the institutions, but also the spheres of knowledge on which institutions are based. In that sense, I believe that the social sciences will have to change very much and very quickly to analyze what is happening today. We cannot continue to function with social sciences that are methodologically structured to carry out national studies at a time when the nation-state has a wide-open role in the world today.

In terms of the United Nations and its institutions, I see the need for new multidisciplinary perspectives, and also a new way of training people. What you also have to take into account—and being an anthropologist, I'm very aware of this—is that there are developmental cycles in institutions. I think the institutions of the United Nations have gone through a developmental cycle, so that now they need to change very radically. New institutions also have to be created, because it's very difficult to reform institutions where the actors already have such set interests.

TGW: How would we dismantle the ones with set interests? I think this is always the problem in looking at institutions. They never disappear. We always create new ones. I think this is a criticism that comes not just from Washington, D.C., but more generally. We keep adding things, but we don't get rid of or radically alter ones that have been around for a long time even if their productivity or their creativity is pretty minimal.

LA: There have been quite a number of initiatives and processes in the United Nations that would have led to a new institution, but they have been stopped by specific national interests of powerful countries. So I find it terribly unjust to blame the institution, when many of the faults that are criticized do not come from the institution, but from the governments, because they have certain interests, and therefore pressure the institutions to behave in a certain way. This not only happens with the United Nations, it happens with regional institutions that are created in other parts. It happens where governments put their national interests above the interests of having an institution that can manage spaces of negotiation in a global environmental. But I think it is this myopia—

TGW: Short-sightedness.

LA: Thanks, I think it is this short-sightedness of some countries that think it is in their interest to weaken the United Nations, because it gives them a greater power of acting, without being accountable, defending a single sovereignty against the sovereignty of every other country in the world. In the long term, it's going to be detrimental to that power because there is going to be no way of rationally solving all the conflicts that they are giving rise to in an interdependent world precisely by ignoring the human rights and the democratic principles that they supposedly espouse.

I think if the United Nations continues to be weakened, and if no new institutions are put forth that truly engage political forces and nation-states in a political dialogue, we are going to have an

extremely conflictive international atmosphere. And that is going to be detrimental for everybody. Everybody loses.

Now, when you think that this is happening at a stage of world evolution where the sustainability itself, of how humans live, is in question, really it makes you wonder whether people have reason or not. That is happening precisely when so much cooperation is needed to avoid the risks of unsustainability. And I would like to emphasize that there can be no environmental sustainability without “conviviability,” which is the word I am using for social sustainability.

TGW: Social sustainability? Could you explain?

LA: This came out of my research in the Lacandon rainforest in Mexico. But I found exactly the same need for this concept reproduced in the world stage, in UNESCO, in the following way: you cannot save the trees in the Lacandon rainforest if you don’t give farmers other options, and if you don’t promote convivial relations between local peoples. In Spanish, we have a much better word for it, which is interesting. You don’t have a word for this in English. It’s called *convivencia*, which means not only to live together but to experience things together, in a convivial way. So you need *convivencia* first so that farmers can act in a sustainable way towards the rainforest.

In the same way, at world level, you need not only a concern for environmental sustainability, you have to transform all the political questions into a question of social sustainability, of *convivencia*. There is no future for the world without *convivencia*. *Convivencia* is the step previous to sustainability and it is highly dependent on culture. But at this moment, we still don’t have the intellectual instruments to think about the need for a global social contract that encompasses environmental concerns and social sustainability.

TGW: What would you see, then, as the main, or the two main intellectual challenges of the next ten to fifteen years? If you were the czar of research at the United Nations, or anywhere else, what is the assignment? In what would you invest your resources in order to make a difference?

LA: Wow. What I keep wondering about the contemporary world is whether there are historical processes that are going to overrun the major deliberate schemes we have been putting in place to improve human living. You see, as an anthropologist, I believe we are in the midst of a civilizational change, not only within the western world, in terms of technology, forms of organizing social life, economy, and so on, but also in terms of the relationship of Western civilization with other cultures in the world.

It is the greatest challenge after the advent of industrial capitalism, because it is first of all capitalism transformed into a world system, which means that everything that was guaranteed in industrial capitalism in the West must now be guaranteed for the rest of the world. And this is very problematic. But it means also that the way cultures have encountered each other for centuries has changed deeply. Part of the civilizational change, in my view, is a cultural transition, which is a very profound change in the way that cultures relate to each other. This is the book I'm writing now.

So this is the preface to answering your question, of what are the main challenges. I would say the first challenge of the United Nations is to create a new scheme for the coexistence of different cultures that are no longer juxtaposed as a mosaic of cultures, but as currents in a single river. This is how we defined it in the UNESCO *World Culture Report*. But in order to have a cultural *convivencia*, we need a new political philosophy and new institutional arrangements. So I would say one of the challenges for the United Nations is to create the spaces, identify the people who would be able to

develop these concepts and perspectives, and put them in positions where they can lead this world debate on how different cultures and religions can coexist.

More specifically, in terms of intellectual challenges, I see two major ones. The first is the worrying loss of the diversity of knowledge that humanity has taken millennia to accumulate, a fraction of which is being conserved only for instrumental purposes, of exploitation through patents. The second is that market-driven societies tend to be culturally and spiritually barren. The consequences of this in terms of loss of sociability and cultural meanings can be seen in developed countries coupled with the trivializing effects of the media. And this is beginning to happen in the middle-income developing countries. Thus, the social and cultural dimensions of sustainable development must be an intrinsic part of any model of development.

TGW: That should have been my last question, but there was one thing that I had meant to ask earlier, because you have used the term a lot—"interdisciplinarity." You mentioned that one of the successes of the United Nations was becoming intercultural, or multicultural, and figuring out new ways to get together. Why is it that we in the academy are so poor at doing interdisciplinary research? How can we alter this? We all talk about it, but we are basically still organized, as you mentioned earlier, in a nineteenth century way. Are there some ways to get around this? I'm going to ask you to be dean now.

LA: I share your concern. It's been twenty or more years since we've been talking about interdisciplinarity, and very little change has come about, because the disciplines are mounted on institutions, and institutions create a turf where people have positions and interests. It is extremely difficult to reform institutions. So I think a lot of steps forward have been made in creating interdisciplinary careers, multidisciplinary research areas and projects. The problem is that we don't

want to lose the depth of theoretical understanding that each of the disciplines has given. If you go interdisciplinary, sometimes it leads to much more superficial kinds of analysis.

So I don't know how to answer that, except that we should be training young researchers to think in a different way. This means that theoretical research at universities must be given support and this is precisely the area that has been deeply undermined with neoliberal policies. Changing disciplinary demarcations requires intensive philosophical inquiry, again an area that has been neglected; understanding new phenomena such as changing gender and sexual roles requires opening up new hybrid fields such as masculinity and sexuality studies; understanding the new health challenges requires new specializations such as environmental medicine and so on. There are many other areas that now may seem very small and restricted, but in terms of the impact on society I think it's going to be enormous. So what was the question?

TGW: How can we do interdisciplinarity? I think we actually don't know. Unless we're going to dismantle all departments, it's a little hard to just move ahead with interdisciplinarity.

LA: In terms of interdisciplinary work in development, I think what would help greatly is to be very frank and to say, "We have failed." I mean, if after thirty years of development studies the inequality between the richest and poorest in the world has doubled, we have failed. If in terms of opening opportunities for women and we now find so many women who have unable to have fulfilling lives, and not only for economic reasons, then certainly we must change our thinking. If the predicted results of recent economic development models and environmental sustainability models have failed for reasons related to political, social and cultural factors, it is urgent to support the non-economic social sciences. Not as adjuncts, once again, to economics or natural sciences. This is why I keep insisting that social sustainability is the condition qua non for sustainability. I think we have to be very frank in

doing the critique, and show why previous models were wrong, and not wait for societies to collapse in order to then say, “Ah, well yes, we should look at other factors.”

TGW: Is there some question I should have asked and I did not get around to? You had a little list to start off with.

LA: I had a little list, yes. I think we’ve touched upon it—division of tasks between UN agencies, yes, and multiculturalism. I think these are all the questions I would think about.

TGW: Then all have to do is say thank you. We’ll take a few minutes’ break and have a bit to eat. Thanks so much, Lourdes.

LA: Thank you, Tom.

TGW: We are resuming tape two for just a moment.

LA: Someone once said that the United Nations is a dream managed by bureaucrats. I would correct that by saying that it has become a bureaucracy managed by dreamers. Certainly you have to be a dreamer to work in the United Nations with conviction. It is only if you have this sense of mission that you can withstand the constant battering by governments who are afraid that the United Nations will become a world government. So what is very difficult in personal terms is to believe in something and stop at the edge of the possible because you can go no further. But this is where one has to acquire a certain wisdom. This is the wisdom of knowing that even if only the possible is achieved, it is the best that could be done while respecting all the different views of so many different peoples and countries. So in the end, someone who works in the United Nations has to be a magician of ideas, because working for the United Nations is like working for a government in which all the political parties are in power at the same time. You have to be a magician of ideas in order to try and find that particular idea around which you can build the greatest consensus.

TGW: That's a very nice image. We should figure out a way to put that in the subtitle of one of our volumes—"a magician of ideas." Thank you.

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