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Culture and Peace: Violence, Politics, and Representation in the Americas

It is with great interest for the debate to be held here that the UNESCO Office in Brazil has joined the Teresa Lozano Long Institute and the Arte Sem Fronteiras (Art without Borders) Association to hold this seminar. Being more than just a gentle statement, that is our actual expectation: to obtain from the experts gathered here contributions to our work and our inquiries.

The Report of the World Commission on Culture and Development, published by UNESCO in 1995, reflects on the diversity of senses and the multiple forms of culture, discussing its potential as both an instrument for development and an end in itself, expression of fears, fantasies, wishes, ways of being and feeling. It also defends its potential to re-enchant the world, to the construction of a culture of peace, the practice of creative liberty in favour of societies and civilization projects opposed to violence.

Nevertheless, I am positive that, in order to advance, we need to increasingly approach and understand violence as a cultural phenomenon. We know how limited and insufficient it is to circumscribe violence to criminality , although that is certainly one of its cruellest representations. Neither can we put it under a glass shade for being a social anomaly. Or else, to apply that same simplifying logic to the individual scale and end up believing that *violent are the other people*. It is necessary to decipher the meanders of violence generation within the much idealized familiar universe, where one of the most important cultural sources of aggressions against women and children, as well as discrimination by reasons of race or sexual orientation, can be found.

It is also necessary to be aware enough to understand that in the private space, violence is subtly introjected in our minds to become a source of beliefs and attitudes.

By its turn, the mass media currently sells violence as a spectacle and, by allowing us to reject such violence and to be compassionate about it, it then helps us to appease our conscience. By consuming images of what we consider to be Evil, we can comfortably feel on the side of Good.

Even though this forum is aimed at Latin America, we know that this has become a world-wide problem. It seems needless to mention this on a week when war is being presented to the world as an alternative for the construction of peace. From the global scene to the daily life of our cities, it materializes in walls, electric fences, graffiti, depredation and special segregation.

Such concern is founded and generalized among social classes. Nevertheless, as Brazilian statistics show, the classes that formulate it the most are the less affected, that is, security appears as the worst item among the problems mentioned by the population of the safest areas of our cities. Just like the access to cultural goods, only in an inverse proportion, violence also does not reach people in the same manner.

In Brazil, that would mean about 21 homicides for 100 thousand inhabitants in year 2000, figures only smaller than those found in Colombia. The victims are mainly young, poor, and black people, inhabitants of the cities' outskirts. Among young people, those figures rise up to 52 homicides for 100 thousand, violence being the cause of 40% of the deaths in this age-group of Brazilians. In some metropolitan areas, that rate exceeds 50%. The dimensions of this phenomenon have even caused an impact on the country's demographic structure, where there is currently a deficit of young males aged between 15 and 24.

Since 1997, UNESCO/Brazil has been researching and analysing youth victimization in Brazil and comparing it to data from about sixty countries around the world. Such studies, consolidated in February 2002 under the title *The Map of Violence 3*, present evolutionary series and a detailed regional distribution of data, thus allowing the design of innovative public policies, especially those concerning youth. Among the activities developed by the Organization itself, I should highlight the opening of schools to the public during the weekends, which takes place in some of the most violent metropolitan areas of the country, such as Rio de Janeiro, Salvador and Recife. In those places, partnerships involving the school network and NGOs allow the schools' space to be used for cultural, sport and leisure activities, thus creating new ties among the members of the involved communities and offering possibilities for learning and the access to culture.

In addition to the several causes of social nature, which belong to the field of necessities, youth find, in the individual and symbolic plan, motivation of cultural nature – the desire to take advantage, to affirm courage and the possibility of being the protagonist of a life without purpose. More than a war between bands of criminals that, during 10 years has killed in only one of the suburbs of Rio de Janeiro, more than 700 people aged between 13 and 25, the feature film *City of God* depicts a path of degradation. Starting in the 1960s with petty crimes - by then still minimized by the shame before the

offender's family and community, by the fear of the father and the police and when crimes of passion were still the most shocking - the story of City of God is led, by the introduction of drug traffic in the area, to a frightening closing. Through a crescendo of recruitment of increasingly young people for the traffic, the saga ends when children take control of the area and join a game with death with no return.

Speaking of Brazil, similarly to the rest of Latin America, accelerated and unplanned urbanization transformed a country that had 70% of its population living in rural areas in the 1950s into a 70% urban country in the 1970s. This certainly explains a large portion of the problem, and once again, the process of destruction of the relations and cultural codes of migrants – black, indian, mixed - and peasants is in its core.

Another determining factor, also shared with Latin America, albeit the Brazilian levels are the most serious, is social inequity. Not only poverty but inequity, once it is known that many extremely poor countries show quite reduced levels of violence. Coexistence and confrontation between wealth and poverty seem to dilacerate social relations and to make way to violence. It is as if everyone was invited to the great party of consumption but only a few were allowed to enter the ballroom.

Meanwhile, we cannot risk immobilism due to such assumptions. I mean immobilism caused by addressing all problems to social issues and believing that only structural changes could solve them. The reduction of criminality and violence must be attacked from multiple fronts and cannot wait.

Such conviction has been moving UNESCO/Brazil towards the permanent articulation with governments and the society for the identification of problems and for programs and projects that have been tackling the relations between gender aspects, discrimination, youth and violence. A series of projects in the field of art, creativity, Hip Hop – artistic production with critical social content by young people from the suburbs – have been posing alternatives to the engagement of young people in the organized crime. Alternatives to be explored in the fight against violence.

We now face a complex set of factors and, while paying attention to relation between Culture and violence, we cannot set the reflection over values aside. It was not long ago when the guarantee of social relations and the harmony of the public space was based on the discipline of work and the discipline of family. The technical progress that has extinguished jobs, and the ideology of consumption, by superposing itself to established values, strike against both. They cause unbalance in the private life and turn public life empty. Nowadays, there is an elite without a cause, enclosed and narcissistic. Quoting the thoughts of researcher Ana Maria Ochoa, during her stay in Brazil in 2002, an elite that urgently needs do give hope a program.

It is necessary to socially reinvest in the idea of *neighbours*, which currently seems to exist exclusively in private relations. Brazil, a country that has long nurtured the myth of racial and social cordiality, now faces social indicators that reveal a cruel portrait of the real life of its population of African descent. A historic construction of violence, from slavery to the abusive power of land owners, socially tolerated and justified by the Church, by the State itself and even by respectable portions of the country's *intelligentsia*.

Several risks related to the lack of comprehension of the cultural dimension of violence appear when we try to find solutions to it. Common sense frequently argues for its reduction by violent means, turning legitimate the use of violence against violence. Studies from the University of São Paulo show that the general public largely is largely in favour of shooting suspects or screening people for their appearance. On a personal level, the public finds it fair to assault those who offend one's mother or girlfriend or even doubts one's masculinity. A corollary of such ideas is that those who defend human rights are considered to be on the criminals' side.

On the other hand, the sustainable processes of violence decrease, in spite of being slow and requiring the perfecting of the repressive mechanisms, are always associated to non-violent methods such the improvement of the judicial system, public education, civil rights, citizenship, democracy, and the promotion of common spaces. Convinced in this sense, the social movements in Brazil growingly tend to discuss a positive agenda including proposals that range from poor youth inclusion to disarmament campaigns.

Our work in Brazil has shown in practice Culture as a possibility of social reconstruction and coexistence. We permanently need to invent new practices, new languages, new modalities. We need resoluteness to contribute to the construction of new forms of sociability in view of the individualistic fragmentation of the world. New agents, new sensibilities, new alliances. We count upon

the efforts of all researchers in this forum and look forward for its results. Thank you very much for the invitation and the opportunity for this partnership.

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