



World Library and Information Congress: 70th IFLA General Conference and Council

22-27 August 2004
Buenos Aires, Argentina

Programme: <http://www.ifla.org/IV/ifla70/prog04.htm>

Code Number: 183
Meeting: 71. Plenary Session I.
Simultaneous Interpretation: Yes

The walls of information and freedom

Adolfo Pérez Esquivel

Nobel Peace Prize winner
Argentina

I appreciate the invitation to participate in the Congress and share this conference with you, although Dr. Héctor Gros Espiell, from Uruguay, was expected to be the speaker. He is a man of a remarkable career in the public and academic activity of several international forums.

When Mrs. Marta Díaz from the Book Foundation (Fundación El Libro) invited me to the conference, I suddenly remembered many things, especially one which made me think in some events during my childhood that I never forget. In public squares, there were small popular libraries, kind of French-style book kiosk, where the public could refer to and borrow a book and sit under a tree or on a bench to read and appeal to the intellect and spirit for recreation. It was something very easy for any neighbour, without having to move to a public library, which many times was far away. This initiative was developed by a great man, an intellectual and a politician, Dr. Alfredo Palacios, tireless socialist that wanted everybody to have, regardless of their social class, access to education, health and work, the indispensable foundation of cultural development throughout the country and necessary to awaken the love for reading.

I remembered something that still today, in spite of the time and years that have gone by, is still present in my mind and heart. I used to meet some friends of mine with whom I alternated games and reading. As it was usual, one day I borrowed a book from the small popular library at Parque Lezama and was impressed by a fragment in scene XIX of the book *La Vida es Sueño (Life Is a Dream)* by Calderón de la Barca, since at school we were reading and acting out plays, and I was supposed to learn Segismundo's speech by heart. I had the bad idea to tear the page out of the book, thinking that the librarian would never notice. I returned the book and the following day I went back to the square to borrow the same book again. The nice lady looked at me kindly and firmly, and straight-from-the-shoulder said, "Yesterday you tore a page out of the book... Are you planning to tear more pages or are you going to return the page?"

A tomato would look pale compared to my face; I ran home to look for the page and bring it back. I can assure you that never again have I torn a page out of a book. And that after church, libraries and bookshops are the places I show more respect to.

I would like to share with you some reflections on “The walls of information and freedom”. Any society is the result of those who comprise it. We are living complex moments, full of uncertainty and violence, in every country and in the world, signalled by an imposed globalization, word which I dislike and the results of its application I dislike even more, since it responds to hegemonic policies and to the control and exclusion of most of the peoples badly called “third world”.

I would like to begin by giving an example of a situation that we have all experienced, in one way or the other, and that marks a time before and after in international relations: the terrorist attack to the Twin Towers in New York, that deeply touched us due to the barbarism unleashed and to the victims of insanity that believe that violence is the way to achieve their goals.

I was in Porto Alegre, Brazil, with the Governor of Rio Grande do Sur, when the terrible attack shook us. Almost at the same time, 10 or 15 minutes later, the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) issued another piece of information that no media covered and thus remained in oblivion... The news was that, that day, 35,000 children in the world had starved, and every day the same number of children die, doomed before they are born and with no hope of living. What do we call that? Negligence, lack of resources and policies. We can look for many justifications and adjectives, but I call it “economic terrorism”. In the world more than 950 billion dollars are spent yearly in weapons, projects of destruction and death. The last reports on *Reading and illiterates* in Latin America indicate that today more than 880 million people are illiterate. Most of them live in impoverished countries in South America.

Although in some countries in South America great effort has been undertaken with regard to education by means of literacy campaigns intended for the population, it is also true that the student drop-out rate is high. In Latin America there are 43 million people who are illiterate. According to index figures, this number corresponds to people that are more than 24 years old. Indigenous communities as well as urban and rural marginal population centres reveal social inequalities in relation to access to education and opportunities of personal and social development.

The report points out the lack of interest in reading: books have competitors now, like video games, the computer, television and the lack of incentives to promote reading.

The Argentine government through the Ministry of Education is concerned and developing some initiatives, such as bilingual schools intended for indigenous communities and the recovery of their values and cultural identity.

In November of the current year, the “Congreso de la Lengua” (Language Congress), organized by the Spanish and Argentine governments, will be held in the city of Rosario. At the same time, the Indigenous communities and the Recovered Factories, such as IMPA, and the Service for Peace and Justice Foundation (SERPAJ) that I represent, will organize “El Congreso de Las Lenguas” (Languages Congress), but not in opposition to the official one which is a valuable initiative.

We think that the “Congresos de Las Lenguas” is the recovery and valorization of cultural identities, spirituality, and the roots and the memory of native peoples, and that it is necessary to share, recover and strengthen their cultural richness.

We must interpret the world and its social events. No society is static, all of them are subject to the dynamics of change and, in our time, these changes are increasingly more rapid and vertiginous. It is necessary not to forget since scenarios and subjects have changed in a short period of time and we must reflect on the courses of action to undertake.

After the Second World War, the horrors lived by humankind, the Holocaust and the atomic bombs dropped at Hiroshima and Nagasaki, death and destruction have left deep wounds, many of which have not healed yet.

Humankind tried to establish a code of practice that would enable coexistence and peace; stemming from this effort and necessity, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was proclaimed, as well as Pacts, Protocols and International Conventions such as the Convention on Infancy, Rights of Women and of Indigenous People and the Convention Against Torture, among others.

In America, the Organization of American States (OEA) constituted itself, as well as the Inter-American Court of Human Rights, International Law and Freedom of Information, among many other political and social conquests.

However, the struggle for power and hegemony of the two great powers led to the erection of walls separating peoples, families and friends, who, during decades and still today, have been marked by the hatred and intolerance of predominant political and economic interests.

The end of the Cold War, and the Fall of the Berlin Wall, was the symbol translated into the images that travelled round the world, of a people that demolished the wall with whatever tool they had, even with their own hands which intermingled with their cry and demanded the right to live and the unity of peoples; many of us thought that there was a new hope and that the so deeply desired peace had brightened the life of all humankind like those lights that demand the end of horror and the hope for life.

We were wrong and we must accept it. The world has become more intolerant and insecure. All the work and effort patiently undertaken by the United Nations for more than 50 years was disarticulated after the attacks on September 11th. The patient work of the international community --to lay the foundations of international law-- were demolished like the Wall of Berlin, not by the peoples, but by their governments.

Other walls exist in several parts of the world. The one Israel builds to separate Palestine people, ignoring and disregarding the decisions made by the United Nations, which today has become weaker and has lost credibility. Violating human rights and the rights of peoples.

North and South Korea, a people that had been divided for decades, families that only recall, and may be cherish, distant tenderness. They do not know when they will be able to overcome the wall of hatred and intolerance.

At this time of the so-called globalization, the traffic of merchandise, which is called "free market", is being imposed but people are denied their rights when Mexicans are not allowed to enter the United States, where at the frontier with Mexico a wall of steel plates is built to prevent the entrance of immigrants.

Here in Argentina, during the military dictatorship that hit the country from 1976 to 1983, walls had also been put up in Rosario, in the province of Santa Fe, so that the delegations that participated in the World Football Championship, would not see the poverty and the misery in the slum Las Flores.

We could give examples of many of the walls that seek to hide the truth or separate the lives of peoples, as in the case of Pope John Paul II during his trip to Santo Domingo to celebrate the 500th anniversary of the Conquest of the New World, where a long wall was built so that the Pope would not see the country's poverty.

But the most difficult walls to tear down are those that live in the conscience, the mind and the heart. Those walls of intolerance and hatred, like the manipulation of information by big informative corporations, that many times, instead of supplying information, disinform or distort the truth.

Rereading Mahatma Gandhi, that says that “lies are the mother of violence... the mother of all lies is the lie that we keep saying to ourselves... and when we accept that lie as the maximum truth”.

Instead of exercising freedom of press, which means to inform about events and facts in every country and in the world, freedom of venture is exercised according to the interests of informative corporations and the application of undercover or open censorship.

Freedom of press is not a synonym of freedom of venture. Few times, in big monopolic informative corporations, do these two come together in the service of truth.

I will give an example: a few months before the war against Irak started, I travelled to Bagdad from Amman, Jordania. Together with another Nobel Prize winner, Mrs. Mairead Corrigan Maguire from North Ireland, Country Voices from the U.S.A and religious. It is a long trip through the desert, more than a thousand kilometers between the two cities and more than two thousand back and forth, since the imposed blockade impeded the use of the airports and the only way to get there was the road, an asphalt belt in the desert.

During the Persian Gulf War, the chain CNN, informed of the high technology developed by the Allies; the dead were not mentioned, an aseptic and “clean” war was shown along with the great advance of the “intelligent bombs”. CNN informed that in Bagdad two of these intelligent bombs had entered through the ventilation tube of a military bunker and had killed the high-ranked military officers. The information seemed appropriate for a sports competition but not for a war newscast.

When we arrived in Bagdad and left our belongings at the hotel, which today does not exist, we were taken to meet a woman who was called Ayamira and lived in a covered wagon in front of a bunker. With her, we went inside and saw photographs of children, toys, clothes, flowers, memorabilia of the children who had died there; it was a shelter for children. Ayamira saved her life because she had gone out to wash the children’s clothes, when she returned, her family was no longer there. I do not know what happened to her after the invasion of the war against Irak, waged after a campaign to justify the invasion which was based on a lie.

Today information is still concealed from us and that is called “freedom of press”.

I believe more firmly in alternative media, in communitarian broadcasts, in independent sectors than in monopolies that increasingly manipulate and concentrate communication media and that continue to kill and chain freedom of press.

The privatization of communication media must be regulated and well-balanced so that the information given is really accurate and not subject to manipulation.

Many barriers have been set up, walls of intolerance and manipulation based on open or undercover censorship. Either on the part of the State or of great monopolies that increasingly concentrate information media by means of strong economic resources. Generating collective behaviours of acceptance or rejection, but preventing the critical analysis of facts. It is a way of conditioning the conscience and of executing dominance. Behaviours and values are imposed with the aim of creating a culture of violence. You only need to observe the signs of violent scenes in children and adolescents and conditioning factors in their individual and collective behaviour.

Freedom of press is being threatened, as is the heritage of the peoples and their cultures, which are being subdued by the prevailing globalization.

Social and cultural resistance is fundamental for the sake of freedom and the rights of individuals and peoples. To discern and find the values that constitute the peoples’ identity and lives.

We are facing great challenges and I think that you, who are the ones in charge of preserving the memory and the knowledge of humankind's great schools of thought, can contribute to ensure that they do not get lost in the voracity of globalization that an "only way of thinking" imposes on us and that leads to the destruction of identity and culture.

Resistance, cultures and the values of each people must be strengthened through a "way of thinking of their own" that would enable them to share and transcend their contributions and sense of life.

Memory is the origin of the life and history of the peoples. Libraries are not a depository for books, but dynamic centers of collective memory that recreate the thinking and the lives of peoples. I think that, even though the diversity of state and public contributions strengthen the ties and cultural relations of peoples, we must never forget that the objective of libraries is to be in the service of peoples and that books are assets to be shared.

I always remember the student rebellion in May 1968 in Paris that proclaimed "Let's be realistic, let's ask for the impossible". That which seems impossible, is possible. In one of my books I state that if utopia does not exist, we must have the courage to invent one. Otherwise, we can commit the crime of repeating Sisyphus Myth, as Albert Camus rightly pointed out, of the absurdness of existence and useless heroism.

Freedom is an asset that belongs to every person and to all peoples, we are undertaking new courses of action for humanity, lifting the veil of impunity and overcoming the domination that a few and powerful people want to impose, by means of the media, on the majority of the peoples.

Following the challenge assumed by the World Social Forum, held in Porto Alegre, Brazil and in India, as well as by thematic forums in several countries, new life networks and possibilities for the peoples are being built. This increasingly stronger clamor in the construction of "Another World is Possible", if we come together, if we have the courage to build and if we do not allow fear or the belief that nothing can be achieved to dominate us.

Freedom is not a gift that can be given away, it must be conquered and it means assuming the responsibility of sharing and walking together in the construction of new living paradigms.

Adolfo Pérez Esquivel

Buenos Aires, 23-8-04