

BOOKS

UNITED NATIONS, UNESCO AND THE POLI- TICS OF KNOWLEDGE

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*Published by: The Macmillan Press Ltd,
London, 1987, 304pp, £33.*

The problem of the politicisation of UN specialised agencies to date has mainly been the concern of American policymakers, academics and media and to a lesser extent their West European counterparts, who have all seen and presented this problem from their own political and ideological standpoints. The author of this book, on the other hand, tries to adopt an analytical, non-partisan and less ideologically-oriented approach to the whole problem and presents a lesser known side of the discussion which has received less than its share of coverage in the West.

The book is concerned with the politics of standard-setting and focuses on those debates in UNESCO in the areas of communication, education, science and culture which have given rise to the maximum amount of controversy and 'politicisation'. However, the greater part of the book is devoted to the information debate in UNESCO, information policy being an area regarding which the Western powers, notably the United States, and the Western media are most sensitive and which has received the maximum amount of press coverage.

Clare Wells argues that the numerical strength of the Third World countries and their formal voting power is no indicator of their actual power in UNESCO. The Western states, though in a minority, derive their power from their control over relevant material resources and finance, including a superior capacity to publicise their viewpoint and their interpretation of the facts to reach Western publics and shape

public perceptions. Lacking formal voting power, the Western states have sought to contain the new majority by recourse to minority based procedures and appeals for 'consensus', seen to imply something other or more than a majority, and by reversal of the earlier Western preferences for normative approaches to a topic in favour of more 'technical' solutions as is exemplified by the United States efforts to promote the International Programme for the Development of Communication (IPDC) in order to prevent the adoption of a normative approach to the Third World's demands for a New World International Communication Order. Wells concludes that Western interests have so far succeeded in preserving a determining say for the minority in the field of information policy and 'in the process western media could be seen to have been, in effect, enfranchised, while the new majority, by contrast, could be seen to have been for practical purposes disenfranchised.'

The bias of the Western media and the double standards practised by the Western powers is well illustrated by the little publicised case of the scrutiny of textbooks used in UNRWA/UNESCO schools for Palestinian refugees, which constitutes a reversal of long-established non-interventionist policy in the sphere of education and of longstanding UNRWA/UNESCO practice, an infringement of Arab national sovereignty in the field of education and an exercise of selective morality. The case is also a good example of the effects of political events extraneous to UNESCO — in this case the occupation of certain territories by Israel — and how they politicise UNESCO's activities and force it to make what are practically political decisions.

Wells echoes what has now for a long time been realised, that the dichotomy between 'political' and 'technical' does not hold good. The fact remains that so-called non-political matters like education, science and communication are often influenced by political decisions and

are never totally free from ideological considerations.

The issue of politicisation in the United Nations specialised agencies came into prominence in the 1970s and 1974 is often considered to be the beginning of the era of politicisation in UNESCO. However this is somewhat misleading for, as Wells points out, those perceiving an agency as 'politicised' at any given point are likely to be those who feel that it fails to advance their interests adequately, or even that it actively damages those interests. Definitions of that which is politicised or, conversely, consensual are thus relative. Moreover, while from the Western perspective 'politicisation' appears to lie in challenge to and change in the existing order, it is the prevailing order itself and the failure to change it which appear political from the vantage point of the new majority.

On the whole the book seems to be an honest attempt at examining and analysing the phenomenon of politicisation and reflects a non-partisan view. Wells has dealt with 'politicisation' in a limited sphere, that of standard-setting, and does not portray a comprehensive view of politicisation in UNESCO. Nevertheless, the book is illuminating and enables the reader used to partisan accounts of 'politicisation' in UNESCO to see the problem in a new light.

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