Culture Unbound
Journal of Current Cultural Research

The Malady of UNESCO's Archive

By Peter Jackson

Abstract

This paper offers a critical examination of UNESCO's cultural heritage conventions with special regard to the declared transhumanism of the organization's first director-general, Sir Julian Huxley. While Huxley's advocation of eugenics is a well-established fact, this part of his intellectual heritage is usually not considered overtly aligned to his ideas about cultural preservation. On closer consideration, however, improvement and preservation (both cultural and biological) turn out to be closely associated concerns in the field of Huxley's intellectual vision.

Keywords: Cultural heritage, Eugenics, Julian Huxley, Transhumanism, UNESCO, Voyager spacecrafts

Messages in a Bottle

This is an image of a young man from Guatemala, perhaps a worker on a sugar plantation. Alongside other snippets of information, such as the first movement of Bach's *Brandenburg Concerto* No. 2 in F, and a group of pygmy girls' initiation song, the image of the young man from Guatemala is stored on a 12-inch gold-plated copper disc deposited inside the Voyager spacecrafts. The messages on the disc have been recorded for posterity, not by humans in the present addressing future generations of humans, but by the alleged inhabitants (the "we") of planet Earth seeking contact with the unknown inhabitants of other worlds.

According to NASA's official website, the record is said to be a "kind of time capsule, intended to communicate a story of our world to extraterrestrials."[1] In addition to the record, the two probes also contain printed messages from President Jimmy Carter and the UN Secretary General Kurt Waldheim. Waldheim's message runs as follows:

> As the Secretary General of the United Nations, an organization of the 147 member states who represent almost all of the human inhabitants of the planet Earth, I send greetings on behalf of the people of our planet. We step out of our solar system into the universe seeking only peace and friendship, *to teach if we are called upon, to be taught if we are fortunate*. We know full well that our planet and all its inhabitants are but a small part of the immense universe that surrounds us and it is with humility and hope that we take this step. (my italics)

On September 12, 2013, Voyager 1 was announced by NASA to have left the so-called heliopause, the farthermost reach of the stream of charged particles cast out by the Sun, known as the solar wind. We have good reasons to contemplate the wider significance of this announcement. Especially since, at this late point in its life-cycle (the spacecraft was launched in 1977), Voyager 1 will soon have little left to tell the scientific community. Around 2025, its dwindling power supply is estimated to prevent it from sending back any further data to Earth.[2] It may henceforth only endure in terms of what we already know about it, how we remember it, as a sort of votive offering, or as a bottle carrying a message into the void of interstellar space. Since the unknown addressee is fated to remain an object of pure imagination, the more relevant questions to ask in this connection are rather: *What do the messages inside this uncannily isolated probe tell us about the archival representation of human culture? What do they tell us about ourselves?*

Waldheim's statement is not only sheltered by the notion of a peacefully inclined humanity reaching beyond its own bounds, for it also speaks on behalf of an organization that seeks to provide such a shelter. I am not so much thinking of the aims of the United Nations to support peace efforts and promote higher standards of living, but more specifically about the international cooperation agreements sponsored by UNESCO to promote cultural variation and secure the world cultural heritage.

Safeguarding the Intangible Heritage

It is easy to recognize strong affinities between NASA's golden record initiative and UNESCO's mission to produce a lasting archive of human heritage for posterity. Both archives are designed to speak on behalf of mankind's past and present through a carefully selected body of worthy delegates. No matter how noble such aims may appear at a first glance, it is nonetheless striking that the executive bodies in charge of their implementation typically conceal their own origin and short-term historical contingency (UNESCO's own cultural heritage), thus making such aims seem guided by either mysteriously revealed, universally commonsensical, or naturally given principles. To the same extent that the tenets dictating UNESCO's safeguarding measures are surrounded by a sense of unconditionality, they assume a sense of unconditional selectivity. Despite the threat of deterioration, everything recognized by a community as part of its own cultural heritage cannot be embraced by UNESCO's safeguarding measures. By way of example, the inscription of an element on the so-called *Representative List* must contribute to ensure visibility and awareness of the element's significance, it must encourage dialogue in order to reflect cultural diversity, and testify to human creativity.[3] Furthermore, the *Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage* solely gives consideration to such intangible heritage as is compatible "with existing international human rights instruments, as well as the requirements of

mutual respect among communities, groups, and of sustainable development" (p. 2).

Since a community (the so-called "indigenous" community) has to lack the resources for maintaining its own cultural heritage in order to be recognized by the *Convention*, UNESCO's safeguarding measures are suggestive of an artificial life-sustaining system. In stating what safeguarding actually means in this regard, the text of the *Convention* points, in rather univocal terms, to the logic and semantics of the archive: "identification, documentation, research, preservation, protection, promotion, enhancement, transmission" (p. 2).[4] What is the logic of this particular archive (supposing that it is not just *any* archive)? What about its principles of selection? What about the ideology that informs it?

I wish to provide a preliminary answer to these questions by revisiting one of the archive's putative "lawgivers." A man who, in the case of UNESCO's ever growing heritage, personifies the archontic principle endemic to the archive: the British scientist and philosopher Sir Julian Huxley.

Tracing the Heritage of UNESCO's Cultural Heritage Conventions

Serving as UNESCO's first director-general between 1946 and 1948, Huxley was a seminal figure in the formative phase of the organization. I have no intention of scrutinizing his role during this formative phase. With one significant exception, I will not discuss explicit responses from the organization with regard to the contemporary pertinence of his ideas. What I wish to do is rather to indicate certain recurrent themes in his writings that may put his humanism into perspective while simultaneously serving as foil for the current undertakings of UNESCO. Needless to say, the common background of such themes cannot be made properly explicit before a more detailed comparative analysis of Huxley's writings and UNESCO's policy documents has been undertaken. I should therefore make immediately clear, before I go on to discuss Huxley's writings, that I do not aspire to such a detailed analysis. My intention is merely to elucidate the sense of logic that connects apparently distinct themes in Huxley's musings on the curses and blessings of the human species, from the flourishing variety of cultural expressions to the deteriorating gene pool. The logic at work here is neither unfamiliar nor inevitable, yet it does call for critical attention as soon as the contemporary rhetoric of cultural safeguarding starts to rehearse, albeit in rather vague terms, its familiar principles of validity.

Julian Huxley was an evolutionary biologist, educated at Balliol College, Oxford. He held teaching and research positions at Rice University in Texas (1913-16) and at King's College, London University (1935-42). In 1935 he was also appointed secretary of the Zoological Society of London. A devoted humanist,

Huxley published numerous essays addressing topics such as religion and the global population explosion.

One of Huxley's major assumptions as a scientist, which also appears to have influenced the doctrinal underpinnings of UNESCO, was the notion of a biologically informed cultural evolution. In a paper presented at a conference in 1954, he points out that:

> Biological evolution depends on natural selection, which was made possible when matter became capable of self-reproduction and self-variation. Psychosocial or cultural evolution depends on cumulative tradition, which was made possible when mind and its products became capable of self-production and self-variation.[5] (Huxley 1957: 44-5)

In UNESCO's *Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity* – adopted at the 31st Session of the General Conference of UNESCO in Paris, on November 2, 2001 – the first article clearly reverberates with Huxley's assumption:

> As a source of exchange, innovation and creativity, cultural diversity is as necessary for humankind as biodiversity is for nature.[6]

Despite its apparently sympathetic cause – how could we *not* wish for a world brimming with life and an exuberant cultural diversity – the argument's naturalizing rhetoric has a dark pedigree. It displays the age-old temptation to submit the negotiable foundations of human jurisdiction (*nomos*) to the laws of nature (*physis*).[7] Such arguments bring an end to further argumentation by disguising opinions as statements of undeniable factuality. *because I said so, because it's God's will, because nature demands it.*

Huxley was apparently well aware of the distrust that any appeal to scientistic dogmatism might incur. In an early document concerning UNESCO's purpose and philosophy from 1946, he ponders the circumstance that the facts of chemical combination, the facts of chromosomal and Mendelian heredity, and so forth "can be modified and extended, but not overthrown." Because of their inherent plasticity, scientific facts should not, he seems to claim, be considered dogma, but perhaps rather described as a form of doctrine (Huxley 1946: 37). A similar trust in scientific doctrine should also define the purpose of the Humanities, whose chief task it is to grasp the development of the human mind in its highest cultural achievements (Huxley 1946: 42). When former director-general Koïchiro Matsuura spoke on the occasion of the completion of UNESCO's project *History of Civilizations of Central Asia* in 2005, he began by evoking the "gigantic enterprise" of the Humanities that Huxley had envisioned back in 1946.[8] Matsuura was merely paying respect to his predecessor by implying that Huxley's vision had come to fruition in the so-called General and Regional Histories project, which was launched in the mid 1970s. Nevertheless, it is a gesture that confirms the still foundational status of a document that contains all the hallmarks of Huxley's transhumanism, including his plea for eugenics (for which see further below).[9]

A Religion Without Revelation

Huxley's notion of man's role as a guiding agent for evolution is clearly in line with UNESCO's vocation to ensure cultural preservation and variation without compromising the unity of the global community. He imagined modern man, guided by a universal principle of cooperation and conservation, to be facing "[t]he most important […] tasks of our time," namely:

> [T]he development of a new set of integrative, directive and transmissive mechanisms for human societies and for their continuity down the generations. They must include systems in which the community at large can share – systems of shared interpretation, shared belief, shared activity and shared faith (Huxley 1964: 122).

As clearly implied by this statement, Huxley did not fear to jeopardize his position as a declared atheist by evoking religious sentiments. He claimed that the emergence of a humanist religion (sometimes referred to as *transhumanism* or *evolutionary humanism*) was the only counterpoise to a self-defeating psychosocial evolution (Huxley 1964: 115). While this religion did not recognize any God in the pre-modern sense of the term, but rather a divine force attuned to a modernist definition as "universal reality," it still had to work out its own rituals and basic symbolism, it had to reformulate religious ideas and concepts in a new idiom.[10] Devoted to the blessings of modern science, Huxley was convinced that religion could still be "usefully regarded as applied spiritual ecology," admitting that some sort of religion was probably necessary (Huxley 1964: 108). But religion "is not necessarily a good thing," Huxley warns us, mentioning phenomena such as human sacrifice, fundamentalism, refusal of birth-control, and persecution of heretics (Huxley 1964: 87-8). The emergent religion of the near future had to be a good thing, however, because it was destined to believe in knowledge (Huxley 1964: 88).

It is obvious that Huxley's urge to conserve certain expressions of human culture also implied their relocation. What was to become of all the marvels of cultural diversity and creativity that never served a strictly pragmatic or scientific end? As long as they did no harm to reason, nor to the evolution of mankind, they might still serve a quasi-utilitarian purpose by helping us escape the dullness of material needs and everyday routine. Huxley's choice of catchphrase in this regard is unabashedly straightforward: cultural variety is *the spice of life* (Huxley 1964: 85). In stressing the recreational aspects of world culture, he is apparently (and perhaps intentionally) infusing an aesthetic concept of culture into the all-inclusive anthropological category *human culture*, subjecting the redundant aspects of the latter to a sort of pick and chose activity. Cultural surplus is turned into savory dishes, into transcultural tapas.

In an essay about Teilhard de Chardin, Huxley agrees with the palentologist and Jesuit mystic that man was able to transcend himself in personality, so that evolution, in the mind of modern scientific man, was at last becoming aware of itself (Huxley 1964: 210).[11] This point is crucial with regard to everything that

Huxley tacitly understands to be "indigenous," because "persons" are conceived as individuals who have transcended their organic individuality (their *indigenousness* as it were) in conscious participation (Huxley 1964: 210). To understand this new revelation, invigorated through the growth of knowledge, humanism is seminal. And for the sake of this mission, he urges:

> [W]e must learn what it means, then disseminate Humanist ideas, and finally *inject them* whenever possible into practical affairs as a guiding framework for policy and action (my italics) (Huxley 1964: 115).

Since modern scientific man is the only true person, indigenous man must remain an unfulfilled individual, and ultimately an obstacle to the gradual immersion in a global community that seeks to transform the cultural heritage of such indigenous subjects into piquancies and curiosities. Being indigenous thus implies a constant exposure to the willing spirit of humanism, which Huxley chillingly conceived as the injecting force of transhumanism. We need to recall the rhetoric of cultural improvement in Kurt Waldheim's aforementioned message to a community of unknown aliens: *to teach* if we are called upon, *to be taught* if we are fortunate. The dynamic of civilization is conceived as a gradual process of responsive, self-regulating progression, dictated by the obligation of the superior teacher's commitment to the fortunate and inferior pupil.

The Immunological Injection

I have so far merely hinted at a crucial detail in the intellectual biography of Huxley. On its closer consideration, however, we are no longer entitled to treat his choice of metaphor as an arbitrary affair. Let us keep in mind how he considered humanism (wherever it is called for) to ensure a sense of global concern that is not always sustained within a self-regulating immune system – the self-regulatory properties of the indigenous community – but sometimes has to be injected into it like a vaccine.

It is well-known that Huxley was a proponent of eugenics, and that he maintained this conviction, albeit in a non-racist idiom, long after the II World War. In one of his postwar essays he writes favorably about measures designed to artificially accelerate the tempo of psychosocial evolution by mimicking the way in which natural selection obtains its results (Huxley 1964: 272). The method is referred to as EID (eugenic insemination by deliberately preferred donors) (Huxley 1964: 272). It would prevent genetically subnormal humans within so-called "social problem groups" from decreasing the evolutionary fitness of mankind.

> Here again, voluntary fertilization could be useful. But our best hope, I think, must lie in the perfection of new, simple and acceptable methods of birth control, whether by an oral contraceptive or perhaps preferably by immunological methods involving injections (Huxley 1964: 270).

Along a similar line of argument, the threat of genetic deterioration through nuclear fallout is said to be best prevented through cryotechnologies.

> [D]eep-frozen mammalian sperm will survive, with its fertilizing and genetic properties unimpaired, for a long period of time and perhaps indefinitely, and accordingly [allow us] to build deep shelters for sperm-banks – collections of deep frozen sperm from representative samples of healthy and intelligent males (Huxley 1964: 271).

As the reader will already have noticed, we have returned to our point of departure: to the time capsule, to a reservoir of carefully selected samples of psychosocial evolution.

The Second Death of Eurydice

It may seem exaggerated to make such a fuss about an unhappy metaphor in the writings of a man who should not be reduced to a mad scientist à la Doctor Moreau, and who no doubt fought against forces much more ruthless and ignorant than those he sought to defend. Nevertheless, while hesitating to lapse into simplistic ad hominem argumentation, I need to concede that the transition between the domains of metaphor and literal sense, between the humanist injection and the immunological injection, is informed by the same logic of improvement and preservation. According to this logic, any cultural item cannot be unique and spectacular enough to deserve a file in the time capsule. Something diverse has to be foreign to a diversity already defined and secured. Furthermore, despite all good intents and negotiations involved, we must acknowledge that there is a force within the archive that works against the elements subjected to safeguarding, a force that initiates the deterioration of an ever changing living memory incumbent on those in charge of the archive.

I am reminded of the second death of Eurydice in the tragic story, as retold by the Roman poet Ovid. When Orpheus, eager for sight (*metuens avidusque videndi*) of his beloved wife, stretched out his arms, he clasped nothing but the yielding air as she fell back into the depths whence she had come due to the killing bite of a snake (*Metamorphoses* X, 56). Are the endangered traditions facing a similar second death? They first died while their indigenous custodians were being exploited (infected, enslaved, prostituted, proselytized), and then while scholars and travelers – the humanist heroes of the last two centuries – sought to rescue the few remains from the depths of living memory. They were eager for sight of them, trying to capture them by means of note pads, tape recorders, and cameras – all those writing instruments of ethnography – to help fixating an image (or a snapshot) of the assorted remains by means of which they could be remembered, studied, and desired. Does a taint of scandal still remain? Are UNESCO's cooperative and preservationist undertakings irreversibly worthy causes? Is true cooperation really possible if the rules of cooperation, and the roles to be played according to these rules, have been given by one of the involved parties beforehand?

Let us be mindful of how the forgetfulness of UNESCO not only applies to the archiviolithic concept of the archive in general, but also, and more specifically, to some less memorable instances in the writings of its first director-general.[12]

Peter Jackson received his PhD in the History of Religions from Uppsala University in 1999, and is currently professor of the History of Religions at Stockholm University, Sweden. He specializes in the study of Indo-European religions, with a particular emphasis on ancient Indian and Iranian religions, the religions of ancient Greece and Rome, and Germanic religion. He also works on more general theoretical topics in the study of religion, such as cultural memory and the rhetorical dimensions of myth. E-mail: peter.jackson@rel.su.se

Notes

1 http://voyager.jpl.nasa.gov/spacecraft/goldenrec.html . Carl Sagan, who assisted NASA in selecting the contents of the record, expounds on the project in his 1978 book *Murmurs of Earth: The Voyager Interstellar Record*.

2 Newsletter posted at NASA's official website (www.jpl.nasa.gov) on September 12, 2013.

3 Cf. the document *Operational Directives for the Implementation of the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage*, which was adopted by the General Assembly at its ordinary session in Paris, June 16-19, 2008 [retrievable from www.unesco.org/culture/ich]).

4 For a critical assessment of the logic and semantics of the archive, see especially Jacques Derrida's essay *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression* (*Mal d'archive: Une impression freudienne* [Derrida 1995: 22]).

5 The title of the paper, "Man's place and role in nature", alludes to a book by Julian Huxley's grandfather, Thomas Henry Huxley's *Evidence as to Man's Place in Nature* (1863).

6 http://portal.unesco.org/en/ev.php-URL_ID=13179&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html (retreived October 3, 2013).

7 For two fairly recent treatments of this theme, see Carlo Ginzburg's Menahem Stern Lectures (Ginzburg 1999) and Marshal Sahlins's *The Western Illusion of Human Nature* (2008).

8 Address by Mr Koïchiro Matsuura on the occasion of the completion of the UNESCO project *History of Civilizations of Central Asia:* results and perspectives. UNESCO, 5 December 2005 (DG/2005/194).

9 "It is […] essential that eugenics should be brought entirely within the borders of science, for, as already indicated, in the not very remote future the problem of improving the average quality of human beings is likely to become urgent; and this can only be accomplished by applying the findings of a truly scientific eugenics." (Huxley 1946: 38).

10 Cf. the essays "Education and Humanism" (Huxley 1964: 109) and "The New Divinity" (Huxley 1964: 222-4).

11 Huxley's musings curiously recur in an influential and much more recent work, the american anthropologist Roy A. Rappaport's posthumously published *Ritual and Religion in the Making of Humanity*. One such point of intersection is Rappaport's somewhat quirky plea for a reconciliation of science and religion as the means to enhance ecological awareness, which echoes Huxley's notion of "applied spiritual ecology" (see above) (Huxley 1964: 109). Another point of intersection is the idealistic trope, involving nature's, evolution's, or culture's emergent self-awareness, which concludes Rappaport's study like an epitaph: "Humanity […]

is not only a species among species. It is that part of the world through which the world as a whole can think about itself." (Rappaport 1999: 461).

[12] Derrida, in the aformentioned essay, employs the neologism archiviolithic (composed of the words *archive, violent/violence,* and *lithic*) to indicate the archival violence through which living matter or memory petrifies (Derrida 1995: 12 [and passim]).

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