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Patrick Petitjean

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A FAILED PARTNERSHIP

WFSW and UNESCO in the late 1940s

Patrick Petitjean (REHSEIS – CNRS and Paris 7 University)

UNESCO has, since its establishment, developed direct links with the scientific community through partnership with the International Council of Scientific Unions (ICSU). The political climate of the Cold War, however, thwarted the establishment of a similar partnership with the World Federation of Scientific Workers (WFSW). Yet both UNESCO and WFSW promoted the same ideals: the use of science for peace and the welfare of humanity and scientists' social responsibility in that regard.

WFSW was established primarily on the initiative of two associations of scientific workers, in the United Kingdom and in France, and involved smaller associations in the dominions and in the United States of America. The Russian associations refused to join WFSW until 1952 (just as the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics refused to join UNESCO before 1954).

ICSU was established on a purely scientific basis, while WFSW was defined as a “science and society” movement: the social implications of science, its popularization, professional aspects, the social responsibility of researchers (including nuclear disarmament) and the promotion of unrestricted international cooperation.

UNESCO and WFSW were founded at the same time, in 1946, with similar objectives, and it is not surprising that they were intended to be complementary by their founding fathers: Needham, Huxley and Auger at UNESCO; Joliot-Curie, Bernal and Crowther at WFSW. UNESCO is an “intergovernmental” body and scientists participating in it are appointed by governments: it needs the support of the great mass of scientific workers through partnership with a movement such as WFSW, which is fully consistent with the issue of NGOs as UNESCO's supporting intermediaries.

Founded in London in July 1946, WFSW was highly representative of the scientific communities in France and in the United Kingdom. Needham represented UNESCO at the founding meeting of WFSW and drew up a partnership agreement modelled on the one binding UNESCO and ICSU: funding (for travel, in particular), a liaison officer post paid by UNESCO, an office at UNESCO Headquarters in Paris, and other terms. From December 1946, WFSW had an address and a temporary office at UNESCO for its French-speaking secretary. A grant-in-aid for WFSW was included in the budget estimates.

But the ratification of the agreement by UNESCO was blocked in April 1947 by the delegation of the United States of America, concerned about the influence of French and British communists on WFSW. Auger, France's representative on the Executive Board of UNESCO at the time, was the main supporter of WFSW on the Board. The status of Observer was ultimately granted to WFSW by UNESCO in July 1947 and was confirmed, against the objections of the American delegation, by the General Conference in Mexico City in November 1947. Such status meant that WFSW could be invited officially to UNESCO initiatives, but without funding.

WFSW thus participated in the round tables in Paris (October 1947) on the social implications of science and in UNESCO's General Conference in Mexico City (November-December 1947). Needham circumvented the lack of provision for funding by granting Crowther, Secretary-General of WFSW, an official UNESCO mission (December 1947-April 1948) to the USA, in order to study the ways and means of UNESCO's participation in the Conference on the Conservation and Utilization of Natural Resources (organized by the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations). Crowther was thus able, in addition to his work for UNESCO, to finance his participation in the Mexico City conference and to establish WFSW in the United States of America.

The partnership continued in 1948: WFSW's participation in the preparation of a "science and society" journal in conjunction with UNESCO and ICSU, Frank Malina's participation in WFSW's first General Assembly in Prague in November as UNESCO's representative and Needham's participation in UNESCO's General Conference in Beirut in November-December – for the British Government had refused to include Needham in its official delegation and so, only six months after leaving his post as Director of the Natural Sciences Section, Needham was obliged to join the WFSW contingent to take part in the UNESCO Conference.

But as the Cold War developed, WFSW lost its Observer status in June 1950. The partnership was only revived fifteen years later when the ethos of peaceful coexistence had thawed the frost of the Cold War.