



Towards a Destabilising Universality: The Swan Song?

A careful analysis of all the exchanges and correspondence within the IBE's governing bodies shows that behind this ostensible harmony, which was also linked to the growth of its audience, there were tensions that would grow from the mid-1950s onwards, threatening the very survival of the IBE. The “budding giant” had indeed grown; the political context had changed profoundly. Was it still possible to operate according to the modalities invented in the 1930s, according to largely implicit rules, supported by a growing secretariat whose “dedication”¹ was perhaps no longer that of the pioneers? The tensions created by the very success of the IBE are at the heart of this chapter, which focuses on the IBE's final years as an autonomous intergovernmental agency (1955–1968) (Image 7.1).

A PROCESS FULL OF PITFALLS

The reconfiguration of the international context had immediate effects on the IBE as an intergovernmental institution, particularly from the second half of the 1950s. While the IBE always claimed to be beyond the political and economic turmoil, free from any external disturbance, it was first indirectly, and then clearly, affected by what is known as the Global Cold

¹André Chavanne, president of the last ICPE, 35th Council of 25.11.1968, p. 7. 47_A-2-1-1737, A-IBE.



Image 7.1 Objects on Egypt’s exhibition stand. Egypt was a founder country of the IBE and participated very actively in all IBE activities during the whole period (1929–1968) (e.g. Egypt sent delegates to all ICPEs). In these exhibitions, each country highlighted national specificities, in order to allow for a “visual” tour of the educational world. (© IBE)

War² namely a conflict that was not limited to the face-off between the capitalist West dominated by the United States and the communist regimes led by the USSR, but which had various impacts on the whole planet, including the countries of the South and occupied territories where anti-imperialist struggle movements were multiplying.

²For an analysis of the Cold War in international organisations, see: Kott (2021); the indispensable classic: Soutou (2011); a renewed approach via the triptych internationalisation—reappropriation—empowerment: Faure and Del Pero (2020).

The institutional construction of the European Union³ itself was marked by this, also in its Euro-African component, as it sought to position itself as an “emerging power between East and West, going from North to South”, to compete with the marked ascendancy of the American and Asian continents (Hansen & Jonsson, 2014, p. 21). As is known, the first stage of the decolonisation process took place in the Asian countries until the mid-1950s, the second, mainly in Africa, with some thirty countries on the continent freeing themselves from the colonial yoke, especially in the early 1960s.⁴ At the same time, after the death of Stalin, the USSR and its allied countries reoriented their international policy and became more actively involved in international organisations.⁵

In this new global context, the IBE’s aspiration to strive for universality for the countries and peoples of the world contributing to its activities seemed to be coming true. At least, that is how its members saw it. The UNESCO delegate, the Yugoslavian Asher Delon, expressed it in these terms at the end of the 1965 ICPE: “The Conference has been characterised by an exceptional contribution to understanding among countries, to the elimination of the gap existing between various sections of mankind, and to the strengthening of the international community” (ICPE, 1965, p. 135).

IBE officials were unanimous in affirming that what characterised the ICPEs was the ability to address technical educational issues without ideological conflict and political interference. “Uniting the Holy See and the USSR in a common position is not the least of the Bureau’s achievements.” (ICPE, 1962, p. 70) The Chairman of the Executive Committee of the IBE, André Chavanne, Geneva’s Minister of Education, even noted in 1965:

So it is that the technical work of the Conference this year has been accomplished very smoothly and in a friendly atmosphere. We have often achieved unanimity, as we have striven to make as coherent a whole as possible out of the heterogenous collection of facts that emerges from surveys, and

³ For the relationship between the IBE and the European Union under construction, see Insert 17.1 on Europe.

⁴ See the list in Gleditsch and Ward (1999).

⁵ Stalin’s death also paved the way for the participation of the USSR in numerous international organisations, notably, in 1954, in UNESCO and the return of Poland, Hungary and Czechoslovakia to these same bodies (Maurel, 2006, p. 206).

to organize an ordered series of discussions which reveal how the ideas and procedures planned and executed in one country can be used in another, perhaps thousands of miles away. (p. 135)

This beautiful harmony, proclaimed in 1965, was in fact the result of an evolution in which questions, regulations, negotiations, denunciations, and even the suspension of the ICPE followed one another. We can distinguish two levels: that of the functioning of the Conferences themselves and that of the interference of geopolitical tensions on the other.

The first relates to the effects of the evolution of changing number of countries and participants on the running of the ICPEs. The doubling of the number of delegations and observers—there were 260 participants in 1965, compared to 121 in 1954⁶—made it difficult to continue the ICPEs as originally established. The partners of these conferences expressed their regrets and weariness at the slowness, repetition and superficiality of the sessions and their content. The IBE was trying to remedy this: almost every year, changes were made to improve the relevance of the Conferences and the impact of the voted recommendations, without really reaching satisfactory solutions.⁷

The second level highlights the difficulty of preserving the IBE and ICPE bodies from the geopolitical interference and tensions that were setting the world on fire. Indeed, in the context of decolonisation and the Cold War, the choice of countries to be invited became a matter of controversy: the autonomous territories of the British Empire?⁸ Taiwan or the People's Republic of China? The Federal Republic of Germany or the German Democratic Republic?⁹ Could a state that openly defended a colonial policy in education be accepted in the ICPE? In the absence of precise regulations clarifying these dimensions, and because of their acuteness, these nodal questions led to an acute crisis in 1963 and 1964, where

⁶List of the delegation members, ICPE (1954, pp. 12–18).

⁷In Chap. 11, we will return to the geopolitical stakes of this issue based on an analysis of the debates within the ICPEs, but here we shall confine ourselves to the major institutional stages of the IBE.

⁸Piaget was opposed to this so as not to create inequalities with “the hundred or so other countries, territories and colonies”, but would be outvoted, as the minutes of the 20th Council 9.7.1955 show. 45_A-2-1-1448; and of the 19th Joint Commission 18.11.1955. 36_A-1-79-1455, A-IBE.

⁹This issue was regularly discussed in all the bodies, including the BPI (see Chap. 16).

different blocs clashed, preventing even the educational debates on the ICPEs' agenda.¹⁰

“LIKE THE PHOENIX, THE IBE WILL RISE FROM ITS ASHES”

In retrospect, this glorious XXVIIIth ICPE of 1965 seems like a swan song. In fact, everything had to be reviewed, everything had to be redone, everything had to be built: the operational problems remained; the political dissensions reappeared and grew in the face of the growth of the partners, and the financial problems remained. The director of the IBE, Piaget, recognised this as early as 1966. “The expansion of the Bureau over the last ten years posed new organisational problems”;¹¹ and in fact these now challenged the very viability of the IBE.

To remedy this, two positions were developing. One, supported mainly by the communist and Arab countries, aimed to extend the activities of the IBE and maintain the greatest possible independence.¹² The other, taking into account the precariousness of the Bureau's status and its catastrophic financial situation, envisaged the integration of the IBE into UNESCO; this position was supported in particular by the African countries, among others, because they suffered more than others from the proliferation of international organisations.¹³

Both positions were expressed at the IBE Council meeting in July 1966¹⁴ and both agreed on the proposal to appoint a committee of representatives from twenty-one countries to fundamentally review the nature of the IBE: status, activities, functioning, finances. The resolution from this meeting implicitly outlines the future of the institution by listing the problems to be solved: those identified by the Director in his report concerned the status of the staff, the link with the Geneva Institute of Educational Sciences—the former *Institut Rousseau*—and the need for more in-depth

¹⁰See Chap. 16 on this subject.

¹¹IBE Director's Report to the 31st Council meeting, 4.-5.7.1966, p. 3. 46_A-2-1-1714, A-IBE.

¹²Hungary and Czechoslovakia had developed a new draft statute for the IBE; draft not found, but regularly mentioned in discussions.

¹³G. Towo-Atangana, delegate from Cameroon, mentioned “the ever-increasing number of international organisations is an overwhelming financial burden for many [African countries]”; 35th Council, 25.11.1968, p. 9. 47_A-2-1-1737, A-IBE.

¹⁴31st Council, 4.-5.7.1966. 46_A-2-1-1714, A-IBE.

pedagogical research; the dissatisfaction of many delegations with the mission, scope, working methods and more generally the statutes of the IBE; and the catastrophic financial situation of the Bureau, due to several years of fees arrears from a large number of countries and the increasingly expensive cost of ICPEs, if only to ensure simultaneous translations.

The Committee of twenty-one began its work in February 1967. The two positions clashed from the outset, especially since a relatively concrete French proposal countered the Hungarian and Czechoslovakian draft statutes.¹⁵ It provided for the IBE to be “attached” to UNESCO while guaranteeing its intellectual and functional autonomy. This solution was gradually imposed and was unanimously approved during the Extraordinary Council in December 1967.¹⁶ The resolution passed asked the Director and a select committee of ten delegates to negotiate a new agreement with UNESCO, the main aims of the IBE being

- To undertake pedagogical work and research including comparative education;
- To continue its activities in the field of documentation and information.¹⁷

It was at this precise moment in the meeting that the president of the Council “read a letter that has just been sent to him” from Piaget in which the IBE Director announced his resignation:

In the present state [...] where new brilliant perspectives are opening up for the IBE and where the Council is going to take a decision that has my full support, I feel that this resignation is not only possible without the risk of equivocal interpretations, but also necessary. [...] It is obvious that a new direction is needed, one that is oriented towards the future, while I represent the past.¹⁸

He cited his age and fatigue as the main reasons for his resignation and the desire to devote himself entirely to research. The fact that he was no longer the sole master of an organisation he had led for forty years was no doubt also a factor in his decision.

¹⁵ Minutes of the Committee of 21 meeting. 46_A-2-1-1724-1726, A-IBE.

¹⁶ 33rd Council, 13.12.1967. 47_A-2-1-1728, A-IBE.

¹⁷ 33rd Council, 13.12.1967, 3rd session, p. 7. 47_A-2-1-1728, A-IBE.

¹⁸ 33rd Council, 13.12.1967, 3rd session, p. 11. 47_A-2-1-1728, A-IBE.

The draft agreement, drawn up by the UNESCO secretariat, was discussed by the IBE Executive Committee in February 1968;¹⁹ it proposed adding three paragraphs recognising the historical importance of the IBE and appointing Laurent Pauli, then Secretary General of the IBE, as Interim Director. The Council then unanimously approved the draft agreement, regretting however that the word “annual” had been removed from the organisation of the ICPEs: “the continuity of the work [...] would be compromised if there were uncertainty about the future and the periodicity of the Conference.”

Final act: the IBE Council, the only body empowered to do so, voted unanimously to dissolve the IBE in accordance with article 17 of the 1929 statutes.²⁰ The IBE was now part of UNESCO. The Swiss representative Charles Hummel, concluded:

It seemed logical to unite two organisations with similar aims, as the IBE was in a way the UNESCO of the inter-war period. By being attached to UNESCO, the IBE should become the supreme body of reflection in the field of education. Moreover, its universal character will necessarily be accentuated.

The Swiss president of the meeting, André Chavanne, recognised that “the lack of solidity of its structure has not allowed it to overcome certain crises”.²¹ And he closed with a prediction: the IBE, “like the phoenix, will rise from its ashes. The IBE will die, long live the IBE!”

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¹⁹ 45th meeting of the Executive Committee, 27.2.1968. 65_A-3-1-1729, A-IBE.

²⁰ 35th Council, 25.11.1968, pp. 7 and 10; 47_A-2-1-1737, A-IBE.

²¹ 35th Council, 25.11.1968, p. 8; 47_A-2-1-1737, A-IBE.

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