

“CULTURE IN EXTERNAL RELATIONS”: THE EU IN CULTURAL DIPLOMACY

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Introduction

Cultural diplomacy as both discourse and practice is now significantly present in the work of the European Union. Wisely, however, for reasons that I shall explore below, the European Institutions prefer to use the broader paradigm of international cultural relations. By referring to the topic as “culture in external relations” they sidestep many of the conceptual and discursive pitfalls that use and abuse of the term cultural diplomacy often opens up. As I am at present closely associated with a recently launched EU “preparatory action” in the domain of international cultural relations, my main purpose in these pages is to present the antecedents and nature of this research project. But before doing so, it would seem appropriate to explain why I began by expressing a preference for a term broader than cultural diplomacy. This in turn will require a brief exploration of the notion and of some of its discontents. I am particularly at ease doing so as the OSCE itself has framed the issues of cultural diplomacy in the broader vision that it appears important to advocate. This framing privileges the intercultural competencies that can respond, as a perceptive Turkish political philosopher has put it, to the dual “claims of cultures to retain their variety, and to ... meet and intermingle within the context of a new global civilization ... through risky dialogues with other

cultures than can lead to estrangement and contestation as well as comprehension and mutual learning” (Benhabib, 2002: xii-xiv).

A term and its discontents

Other contributions to this volume have already shown how the portmanteau term “cultural diplomacy” has become a reigning buzzword (indeed the French notion of *mot valise* denotes not just two separate ideas conjoined, but also a catch-all term). It now applies to pretty much any practice that is related – even remotely – to cultural cooperation between nations or groups of nations. In the process, the term has floated quite some distance away from its original semantic moorings. The American writer Richard Arndt has distinguished, rightly in my view, between cultural *relations* that “grow naturally and organically, without government intervention” and “cultural *diplomacy* [that] can only be said to take place when formal diplomats, serving national governments, try to shape and channel this natural flow to advance national interests” (Arndt, 2006: xviii). This is a clear and unambiguous distinction that ought always to be respected. But it is one that has become completely blurred in recently years. The semantic field of term cultural diplomacy is now far more capacious, notably through its association with the term “public diplomacy”, a process that can be practiced not just by governments and their agencies but by civil society and/or private sector stakeholders as well (Cull, 2009). Thus a commonly cited definition of cultural diplomacy see it as “the exchange of ideas, information, art and other aspects of culture among nations and their peoples in order to foster mutual understanding” (Cummings, 2003: 1). In point of fact, mutual understanding is

only sometimes the object and the true protagonists of cultural diplomacy are neither abstract 'nations' nor generalized 'peoples'. *Governmental* agents and envoys are, in other words officials operating in the name of clearly defined interests as well as clearly delineated processes of representation, in a space where nationalism and internationalism merge.

Hence, and this is my second point, many claims made on cultural diplomacy's behalf today are both ambiguous and overstated. The ambiguity resides in attempts to elevate its theory and practice above the level of national interest; the overstatement in the idea that today, cultural diplomacy can help to "manage the international environment" (as one leading expert in the field has put it) and as the vector of that "soft power" which has been already discussed elsewhere in this volume. Both claims are inadequately supported by the empirical record, I would argue; the first resorts to special pleading and the other to wishful thinking.

The problem is compounded when, as already mentioned, cultural diplomacy is seen as a royal road to alliances with non-state actors and engagement with broader publics. The question is whether, in the cultural field, artists and arts organizations are all that prepared to sing the official nation branding tune. The late theatre scholar and activist Dragan Klaic suggested not; for him, their motivations in working across national boundaries, even when it is with governmental support, are "about more than promotion." Instead, these motivations centre on purposes such as mutual learning; pooling of resources; co-financing; technical assistance; joint reflection, debate, research and experimentation; and "in its most complex forms, cooperation in the creative processes, the creation of new artistic works" (2007: 46).

Conversely, as regards governmental stances, the uptake of cultural diplomacy as a new frontier in international relations warrants interrogation as well. Three key questions arise. Is cultural diplomacy really a form of cooperation that transcends cooperation among elites? Is governmental agency central to achieving the goals of trans- and intercultural interaction to which cultural diplomacy now aspires? Can cultural diplomacy overcome negative national images? In all three cases, it seems that too much is expected of the practice – that it is pressed into service in the name of goods that it cannot deliver.

The first ambitious claim is that cultural diplomacy now transcends cooperation at the elite level of the kind that has been pursued by princes and bishops for centuries. Some accounts claim that a world of “static and traditional cultural settings” is being replaced by one “where culture is also a medium between people on a mass scale” (Bound, *et al.* 2007: 16-17). The same authors also tell us that “many-to-many cultural exchange is now very fast moving and capable of profound effect, both laterally and upwardly, to the extent that cultural diplomacy now directly affects and may even direct the more traditional forms of public diplomacy.” There are several problems with this claim. First, the exaggerated directive agency attributed to cultural diplomacy. Second, the implied model of a two-step flow. Closer examination would reveal, I suggest, that cultural diplomacy as it is still practiced today preaches largely to the converted and that it is principally carried out within and across the “high culture” forms — traveling exhibitions, museum exchanges, the performing arts, etc. To be sure, all these forms have become much more accessible to ever larger numbers of people, but has “mass” scale really been attained?

The second misapprehension, I would argue, has to do with presumptions about the power of governmental agency. Today's dense border-crossing flows and migrations are taking place increasingly beyond the grasp and control of nation-states. Now that the primacy of the nation-state has waned, the tight nexus of culture and nation no longer holds. It is not just that this "cracking open," as Ien Ang put it (2011), of the nationalist narrative undercuts the homogenizing image of nationhood and national culture. More significantly, the purposes of mutual understanding are being achieved far more effectively by direct cultural interactions. Cultural diplomacy mavens recognize that opportunities for global contact and exchange are proliferating as never before. Yet curiously they also invoke the challenge of enabling "mass populations to develop the vital skills of cultural literacy – where people are able to understand themselves, and others, and the dynamic relationship between the two." As argued already, it is not a question of mass populations in the first place. But more importantly, the informal webs of relations among artists and cultural practitioners and their organizations must surely engender richer interactions than those proposed or facilitated by State institutions.

The third misapprehension that causes cultural diplomacy to be pressed into heavy duty service beyond its capacities is the idea that it can actually erase deeply negative perceptions of nation-states, including those negative images that have been created by their use of the hard power tools of military action and economic domination. This is the sort of taken-for-granted conventional wisdom justifying the deployment of cultural resources in the name of the often misunderstood "soft power" framework. But is it reasonable to assume that the perceived depredations of the "Quiet American," for example, can be so eliminated? The very people who dislike American hard power are probably long-standing admirers—if the Pew survey data

are to be believed—of American performing arts; there is no reason why they should change their minds about US foreign policy just because the State Department sends them jazz musicians and hip-hop dancers. Cultural tools were certainly used by the USA to counter Soviet anti-American propaganda in both Europe and the global South during the Cold War and/or the cultural and media imperialism thesis (Arndt, 2007). They became salient again in American foreign policy thinking in the USA only after the rise of deeply hostile Islamist fundamentalism, the events of September 11, 2001, as well as the radical deterioration of the American image in the rest of the world after its two Bush invasions of Iraq. Both the theory and the subsequent reality, I argue, have encouraged an illusory shift away from the reasonable aim of conveying a positive image of a national culture or of boosting the recognition of a national cultural model in the rest of the world (as the French began to do in the late nineteenth century with the establishment of the *Alliance française*).

Today, however, a more ambitious goal is sought: the voluntaristic extirpation of negative images. This was no doubt the challenge that faced post-war West Germany, which clearly used the Goethe Institute network and a deliberate policy of exporting German high culture—principally music—to present a different face than that of Nazi Germany. But surely enough people in the rest of the world knew already how great German high culture actually was and how well its musicians could play Bach and Beethoven — yet that prowess itself could not erase in one go the taint of Nazism. Moreover, there is simply no valid longitudinal social science research that has compared before and after perceptions and demonstrated the power of cultural diplomacy in this regard. For the moment, then, it remains a stipulation, more a matter of faith than of any real evidence.

One last remark about cultural diplomacy itself, before I turn to its deployment by the EU. It is a good thing that the Istanbul conference agenda, although it referred to “the role of culture in promoting security”, did not foreground culture as a security threat. The latter was a favoured trope in the early years of the twenty-first century, generated by the unconstructive return to influence after 9/11 of the “clash of civilizations” thesis. In those years, the spectre of conflict came to hover in the background of many evocations of culture. Cultural difference in itself tended to be seen as a fertile ground for divergences that would lead inevitably, if they are not addressed, to violent conflict. Hence cultural difference was seen by many as a *cause* of conflict, when in reality difference creates conflict only when it is deliberately politicized, as a pawn of wider and deeper contests between ethnic or language groups over the control of power and resources. Such reasoning is distinctly less prevalent these days, but it might have been expected that the OSCE, for which the topic is new, would be tempted to echo these concerns of the past. It is indeed salutary that it has not done so. To be sure, there are many instances in which group conflict has become “culturalized”, or where cultural expression itself becomes a party to confrontations between particularisms. These deserve attention, but not under the umbrella of cultural diplomacy, which can do next to little to address them.

The EU and “culture in external relations”

The EU’s concern with the subject matter of this conference was articulated for the first time in the European Commission’s 2007 *Communication on a European agenda for culture in a globalizing world*. This document was itself the outcome of a process that unfolded early in the twenty-first century as the Commission gradually empowered itself to become increasingly

proactive with regard to cultural issues. Although the EU had been given only rather limited competences for culture in Article 128 of Maastricht Treaty of 1992 (which became Article 151 in the Amsterdam Treaty of 1997), Member State zealous – and jealous – safeguarding of their sovereignty in cultural affairs, bolstered by the powerful “principle of subsidiarity”, had severely constrained the scope for initiative of the European Institutions in the cultural domain that this text offered. In the new century, however, pressures from a range of advocacy groups, notably the European platform organization called *Culture Action Europe*, and from a number of cultural leaders and politicians, combined with the new determination of the leadership of the Commission itself, led the Commission in 2007 to take the bold and unprecedented step of proposing to the Member States an “agenda” in the cultural realm. This agenda was three-pronged: to promote cultural diversity and intercultural dialogue; to promote culture as a catalyst for creativity in the framework of the Lisbon Strategy and to promote culture as a vital element in the Union's international relations. This third leg was of course the cultural diplomacy dimension, rightly seen by the Commission in a wider international relations framework. This in turn was broken down into five broad sub-objectives as follows:

1. further develop political dialogue in culture and promote cultural exchanges;
2. promote market access for cultural goods and services from developing countries;
3. protect and promote cultural diversity through financial and technical support;
4. ensure that all cooperation programmes and projects take full account of local culture and contribute to increase people's access to culture and to the means of cultural expression, including people-to-people contacts; and

5. promote the active involvement of the EU in the work of international organisations dealing with culture.

To be sure, an image restoring purpose – clearly a diplomacy objective – was also set out, in the following terms

Europe's cultural richness and diversity is closely linked to its role and influence in the world. The European Union is not just an economic process or a trading power, it is already widely - and accurately - perceived as an unprecedented and successful social and cultural project. The EU is, and must aspire to become even more, an example of a "soft power" (sic) founded on norms and values...which, provided they are upheld and promoted, can be of inspiration for the world of tomorrow.

The intention was also to present the EU as a whole, as greater than just the sum of its parts.

This was not going to be an easy task, given that the Member States themselves already had long-established traditions of cultural diplomacy and/or were highly aware of the wariness among many of their people about any loss of cultural sovereignty to the supra-national entity. Was it realistic to expect the official EU to be able to project itself culturally as the spokesman for them all, or as the recognized voice for the projection of an "European cultural identity" that has always been so difficult to define? It was against this backdrop, for example, that several national cultural centres/institutes had in 2006 already formed a non-profit association called European Union National Institutes for Culture (EUNIC). This body's mission statement is "to create effective partnerships and networks between the participating organisations, to improve and promote cultural diversity and understanding between European societies, and to strengthen international dialogue and co-operation with countries outside Europe." Out of EUNIC's work has emerged the initiative called "More Europe" More Europe – external cultural relations" that is supported by the European Cultural Foundation. This project aims to mobilize

cultural actors and political decision-makers on the importance and the role of culture in the European Union's external relations. It advocates for more coordination at the EU level, in addition to the efforts of Member States.

Such international cultural cooperation is the dimension subsequently taken up by the European Institutions. The idea was endorsed by the EU's apex institutions the same year and since then its pursuit has developed steadily. The European Council of June 2008 recognized the value of cultural cooperation and intercultural dialogue at the highest level as an integral part of all external policies and in addressing political processes and challenges. The Council Conclusions on the promotion of cultural diversity and intercultural dialogue in the external relations of the Union and its Member States adopted in November 2008 outlined a strategic approach for culture and intercultural dialogue in the context of external relations. This document called on Member States and the European Commission to draw up a European strategy for incorporating culture in external relations as well as specific strategies for regions and countries outside the Union; it also specified that the experience of Member States should be used by encouraging synergies with a view to contributing to the complementarity of the activities undertaken by the Union with those of its Member States and to initiating more activities and joint cultural projects at international level.

Subsequently, a number of initiatives were launched. The central one for our purposes had its roots in the European Parliament where in 2011, in that body's Culture Committee, the Dutch MEP Marietje Schaake tabled a report on the topic. As her Report observed, "a coherent, coordinated EU strategy on culture in the EU's external actions does not currently exist and needs to be developed. It is not a luxury but a necessity to sustain and foster Europe's

attractiveness in a globally connected and competitive environment.” The Report also pointed out that while coordination can exist side by side with cultural diplomacy at the Member State level, countries elsewhere “explicitly seek to address the European Union, not only the different Member States. Fragmentation and diffusion is seen among and between Member States, but also between different departments and institutions within the EU. This fragmentation without a common strategy hampers the full and efficient use of cultural resources and budgets.” The Schaake Report therefore called for an assessment to be carried out and, on that basis, for a strategy to be devised by the Commission outlining concrete policies and actions. The European Parliament subsequently adopted a Resolution endorsing these conclusions, notably as regards the “fragmentation ...which is hampering the strategic and efficient use of cultural resources and the development of a visible common EU strategy on the cultural aspects of the EU's external relations.” The text went on to refer to the newly constituted European External Action Service (EEAS), and called on the EEAS and the Commission “to coordinate the strategic deployment of the cultural aspects of external policy, incorporating culture consistently and systematically into the EU’s external relations and seeking complementarity with the Member States' external cultural policies.”

In the wake of the adoption of the Schaake Report and the Resolution on the cultural dimensions of EU external actions cited above, the European Parliament decided to launch a “Preparatory Action” in this field (the term is EU jargon for any effort, in the nature of a feasibility study on a given issue or topic, that prepares the ground for a future action in that domain). The European Commission accordingly put out a call for tenders in the summer of 2012, asking for proposals for an analysis of the existing resources, strategies, positions and

opinions regarding culture in external relations. The call stipulated that this analysis would “produce definitions on basic concepts (from public diplomacy to cultural cooperation) and draw conclusions and recommendations identifying areas of strong EU added value on a geographical basis which are meaningful from the point of view of EU instruments’ and also stated that “culture is more and more perceived as a strategic factor of political, social and economic development and not exclusively in terms of isolated cultural events or showcasing (like in the context of traditional cultural diplomacy).” The terms of reference for this Preparatory Action also specified that the research would pertain to the 27 EU Member States themselves, together with Croatia as an acceding country, the 17 countries covered by the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), and the following countries considered to be “strategic partners” of the EU: Brazil, Canada, China, India, Japan, Mexico, Russia, South Africa, South Korea and the United States of America.

The six deliverables of the Preparatory Action were deemed to be the following. Its unfolding would begin with a factual mapping of existing resources, approaches and strategies regarding culture in external relations in the countries concerned that would flow into an in-depth consultation process with key stakeholders in each country so as to ascertain in addition their projects, aspirations and expectations. This work would yield a working report, the third deliverable, which in turn would be the basic document for an international conference to shape and validate the principal conclusions as well as “contribute to building consensus at European level on the added value of a European strategic approach to mobilizing the potential of culture in external relations.” The fifth deliverable would be a final report including strategic recommendations. An overarching sixth and final deliverable would be a

communication strategy to ensure the visibility of the process and the ongoing sharing of its results so that the entire debate can be extended to a wider audience.

The winning bid was submitted by a consortium made up of the Goethe-Institut (the consortium leader), the British Council, the Danish Cultural Institute, the European Cultural Foundation, the *Institut français*, the German *Institut für Auslandsbeziehungen (ifa)*, KEA European Affairs (a private consulting company based in Brussels) and the Centre of Fine Arts in Brussels (BOZAR). These organizations have an extended network of offices in all the 54 countries to be covered under the project; they will be supported also by EUNIC's 80 clusters of EUNIC across the world. The core research for the Preparatory Action is being carried out by two independent experts, Rod Fisher (UK) and Damien Helly (France), together with ad hoc inputs from Gottfried Wagner (Austria), while the present writer was asked to serve as the Scientific Coordinator/Team Leader.

The Preparatory Action is a 21-month project. As it was launched only at the end of January 2013, the initial mapping phase is only just being concluded, while preliminary consultations have just commenced. It is obviously too early to cite any definitive findings, except to recognize the considerable amount of enthusiasm the project has generated. These beginnings augur well for an endeavour whose purposes resonate with the key points expressed and reiterated elsewhere in this volume, namely as Jacques Delors, that European visionary leader, once put it, the imperative for us all, to learn "how to live together", in a new spirit which, guided by recognition of our growing interdependence and a common analysis of

the risks and challenges of the future, would induce people to implement common projects... in an intelligent and peaceful way” (Delors *et al.*, 1996: 23).

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