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A New Cultural Diplomacy

The integration of Cultural Relations and diplomacy

Martin Rose

ifa Input 3/2017

The definition and understanding of Cultural Diplomacy are changing; and they are doing so at a moment when the European Commission is rethinking its own external representation in cultural terms. The joint ifa/EUNIC conference in April 2016 brought together thinkers to contribute to debate on what the closer integration of culture and diplomacy means in practice: what opportunities it offers, what risks it holds and – above all – how we should see the potential scope of culturally-framed actions to influence problems traditionally seen as political. Cultural Relations, in other words, are seen as more potent than previously understood – but with this understanding comes the need to integrate Cultural Relations with diplomacy in search of solutions to challenges that are culturally, as well as politically, rooted. This input seeks to outline an approach to the New Cultural Diplomacy (NCD).

Diplomacy, Public Diplomacy and Cultural Relations

There is a problem of nomenclature in the area of how nations and people relate to each other through culture. In the past, practitioners have tried to draw a pragmatic distinction between state-to-state relations (diplomacy), state-to-people relations (public diplomacy) and people-to-people relations (cultural relations). This has been a useful rule of thumb, but never entirely satisfactory. Categories are never quite as cleanly divisible as this taxonomy suggests, and some at least of the distinctions are more purposeful and less transparent than they wish to appear.

Part of the problem has been ‘Mission Creep.’ Diplomacy, in particular, has looked for new areas of application as its old monopoly of state-to-state relations has fallen before a combination of the internet, the domestication of European (and increasingly extra-European) issues, and the omnivorous centralisation of even low-

level decision-making in national capitals, which has attenuated one of its traditional core functions. Public diplomacy, doctrinally American in origin, has become a tool of this centralisation process – a way of subjugating the independent, long-term, non-governmental business that was Cultural Relations to the shorter-term, policy-directed agendas of government. And Cultural Relations has been – at times a little disingenuously – purist about its methods and its aims.

But while the distinction between the different streams of activity may be conceptually valid, there is no certainty – and perhaps no exclusivity – about who should perform them. The clear water between diplomacy and cultural relations is in part the effect of a rapidly vanishing historical disdain on the part of many diplomats for ‘soft’ activity, and partly that of the Cold War, when that distinction was artificially maintained in order to insulate a separate and more neutral channel of international communication, albeit one that was at times (as we often like to forget)

ruthlessly instrumentalised. Today there is a growing realisation that cross-over is the shape of the future.

Cultural Relations practitioners maintain that the hallmarks of their trade are non-governmentalism and the long view; and that a combination of these two core characteristics with a relatively neutral medium, culture, allows for the earning of trust in a way that policy-driven diplomatic activity within a short-term government cycle cannot. There is truth in this, and those two qualities of non-state independence and a long-term, multi-generational, view are crucial. What has changed is the certainty of where these two qualities should be located.

Supra-national bodies, and the European Union in particular, offer one possible answer to the question of location. The tightening lock of national government policy, in some cases at least, over cultural relations could in principle be loosened by collaboration, partnership and a pooling of resources under the ægis of the EC, always of course subject to the subsidiarity principle. It is easily arguable that the EC is better placed to take a long view than national governments, though this is a development that would not be without its controversial aspects, and an organisation like EUNIC, bringing together as it does the national cultural institutions of the individual member states, may perhaps offer a vehicle.

Culturisation of international politics

But what is beyond argument is that Cultural Relations is becoming more important; and that it needs to help shape, much more actively, the analysis of international crisis and so, inevitably, the business of diplomacy. This will involve all sorts of compromises and the loss of (a not al-

ways un-self-righteous) purity in Cultural Relations practitioners.

As to why it is becoming more important, we are seeing a culturalisation of international politics. The emergence of identity politics is probably an inevitable long-term result of democratisation, and of mass communication through the internet, and results in what Jef Huysmans calls 'violent democracy,' a democracy in which the lines of division become vertical rather than horizontal – faith, race and ideology-bound, rather than defined by class. This makes for the replacement of old-fashioned politics with much more culturally defined identities, and if we don't go quite as far as Tony Blair in seeing the replacement of political ideology with religious ideology as the defining change from the 20th to the 21st centuries, we can at least see well what he is getting at.

Looking at these issues in Brussels in April 2016, ifa posed the questions of how the EC should imagine the role of Cultural Relations in its own external policy; and what are the identifying features of a new Cultural Diplomacy that will reintegrate serious thinking around the core challenges of our societies today. The first follows broadly from the second: the EC, like every national government, needs to be immersed in the broader cultural continuum in which the movements of people and minds take place.

The meeting organized by ifa took four lenses through which to view the question of how Cultural Relations could and should develop. They could equally well have been described as lenses through which international affairs can be usefully inspected: migration, radicalisation, heritage and imagination. They are certainly not the only ways of looking at either, but they do quarter the horizon usefully. Each is an area in which traditionally cultural concerns all too obviously shape present political crises. Each is an

area, in other words, where the experience, perceptions and tools of cultural relations can be of great service to government and to diplomacy, and which therefore serve as proving-grounds for a newly re-integrated Cultural Diplomacy that seeks to effect this re-integration.

Migration

The first is migration, a small word for a huge phenomenon that is fundamentally changing our continent. Migration itself is of course not new, but numbers, speed and intensity are testing the cultural as well as the political certainties of Europe in a way in which they have not been tested since the end of the last war – and arguably testing those certainties much more acutely than in the late 1940s because the people migrating, being largely brown or black and mostly Muslim, fit with a terrible simplicity onto the matrices of prejudice and identity. The growth of political resistance to mass migration and its consequences may be expressed through ‘party’ movements like Austria’s FPÖ, Britain’s UKIP or Germany’s Pegida; but it is a quintessentially cultural phenomenon, a sense of eroding personal and collective identity and a fear of ‘new people’ who are different.

How are they different? Language, religion, customs, beliefs and prejudices – culture. It is this constant sense of cultural difference, seen as more fundamental and more intractable than human commonality, that risks undermining our societies. How we deal with this question, this artfully choreographed cultural confrontation, will define our futures. As a Syrian architect, Marwa al-Sabouni has recently written, “I read about the heterogeneous urbanism, involving zoning by race and religion, in the northern British cities, and in Paris and other major French conurbations, and I recognize the beginnings of the kind of instability we have witnessed so dis-

astrously here in Syria, We might think we are different from each other, but the truth is that we are all human.” Migration is of course a practical problem of management and resources, but as Chancellor Merkel has demonstrated, it is also a fundamental moral challenge to the exclusivity of European societies. Facing it, and dealing with it, requires new tools.

Radicalisation

In this context we are very aware of ‘radicalisation,’ of the imagined road to perdition that is taken by young people whose hopelessness intersects with a well-crafted ideology and a sense of justice and adventure to take them to action, in some cases violent action. It is of course as true of Anders Breivik and any number of other white supremacists as it is of Muslims, but at the moment there are more Muslims on that road than there are Breiviks. That may change. But whether we place more emphasis on the ‘push’ of anomie and social exclusion, of professional, personal, social or sexual lack of traction – or on the ‘pull’ factor of radical ideology and its artfully crafted storylines and imageries, we are looking once again at a series of phenomena that are steeped in culture. And lest we imagine for a moment that this crafting is a one-way street, in 2004 when the Abu Ghraib torture of Iraqi prisoners emerged, a spokesman for the Medical Foundation for the Victims of Torture said, “There have clearly been conscious attempts by psychologists to make the techniques culturally relative to a Muslim population.” We need to understand this ‘radicalisation’ as a socio-cultural phenomenon, driven by some of the forces that Cultural Relations practitioners understand very well, ‘Dark Cultural Relations’ perhaps, and to think through better culturally aware and culturally shaped responses than the US Army was prepared to design for Abu Ghraib. We will never successfully confront or reverse the helter-skelter appeal of

violent extremism without equally adept cultural responses – and here again we see an overt, inescapable and positive role for Cultural Relations in mainstream crisis management.

Heritage

Cultural too is the question of heritage destruction. It is easy enough to put Palmyra and Nimrod, Timbuktu and the Sarajevo National Library into a file marked ‘Culture,’ but this means very little unless we understand that their destruction reveals only the epiphenomena of something much blacker. There is little value in preserving stones in a vacuum: they are an expression of the people who built them and used them. Art history or ‘the heritage of all mankind’ are not sufficient justification for privileging architecture over flesh (“Grief over the violence that ISIS has perpetrated on ‘innocent’ ancient buildings can be viewed against reactions towards the mass destruction of entire cities” – al-Sabouni again.) In this contradictory index of grief, the West is often found wanting. Once again, though, the roots of this destruction, when we follow them into the subsoil, are cultural: the destruction of buildings, shrines and temples is a cultural genocide, an attack on identity through its symbols and expressions. Every act of destruction has a cultural meta-message of obliteration, negation and destruction aimed at human beings. Understanding that the destruction of a Yazidi temple or a Shi’ite Golden Dome or a Sufi shrine in Timbuktu or Tunis is not more or less than, but an integral part of, the genocidal attack on a people. The clue (if we need one) is clear: those attacked may be racially, religiously, sectarian-ly defined, but they are different, or ‘Other’ in the jargon. Their bodies and their cultures are parallel victims.

Imagination

Finally, we looked at a fourth cultural frontier, which we called imagination. This may be a slightly surprising rubric, and it is certainly a net thrown wide. But so much of the rapidly morphing landscape of international affairs depends upon, and helps continually to reshape, the way – particularly young – people look at the world, that it is necessary to see imagination as the warp upon which the woof of culture, and therefore of political interaction, is woven: all the cultural crises of our day are fed by the instantaneous universality of communication to which we have become so quickly but so obliviously accustomed.

A world in which we can imagine, and at least in principle, speak to, any other man or woman on the globe as a neighbour, and access virtually any book, idea or image in a matter of seconds, is a different world from that in which humanity grew up. It is a new world which feeds everything from artistic creation to scientific research and from ‘radicalisation’ to the massive movements of people. Its positives are widely recognised; but alongside those positives we have to recognize the ocean of prejudice, bile, dishonesty and credulity that it has opened up to navigation. This ocean is what the new cultural diplomacy must sail. It is a huge challenge. Not only have the geographical barriers between everyone from terrorists to scientists effectively vanished; but the temporal and practical membranes between thought and action have thinned to transparency. ‘No sooner thought than done’ could be the watchword of young people, whether it is the seeking of a friend on the other side of the world, the development of a research project, the purchase of a weapon or the booking of a ticket from Luton to Gaziantep. It is astonishing how quickly we have forgotten the world before all this was possible – and imagination is

both the currency of this new world and the deficit which Cultural Diplomats need urgently to rectify.

New universality of culture

So the fundamental claim is for a new universality of culture, often in very base forms and for global thinking to embrace it urgently. It isn't just diplomacy of course that needs a radical re-tooling. Industries like journalism, advertising, gambling, games-playing, pornography, retail sales, air-travel, prostitution, market analysis and drug-dealing (to name but a few) have fundamentally changed, arriving from nowhere, reconfiguring themselves and often then disappearing. A world where we can print three-dimensional objects, and may soon be able to print shoes, spark-plugs and pistols in our own homes is not the world an older generation grew up in. Its possibilities, its dangers and its solutions are new. All are cultural; and no one, diplomat or businessman, soldier, writer or people-smuggler, will escape the need for that understanding.

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About ifa

ifa (Institut für Auslandsbeziehungen) is committed to a peaceful and enriching coexistence of people and cultures worldwide. It is promoting art and cultural exchange in exhibitions, dialogue and conference programmes. As a competence centre for foreign cultural diplomacy, the ifa is connecting civil societies, cultural practices, art, media and science. It is initiating, moderating and documenting discussions on the international cultural relations.

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