

Definitions, Ideas, Visions and Challenges for Cultural Diplomacy

Written by Karl-Erik Norrman

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KARL-ERIK NORRMAN, JAN 3 2013

“Cultural Diplomacy” is a comparatively new concept, but very old as a phenomenon in international relations. The potential importance of cultural diplomacy in the future is great. As a Swedish diplomat I had been practicing various aspects of cultural diplomacy for many years before the concept became accepted in the International vocabulary. My reflections in this paper are based on my own experiences as a Swedish and later as a European “cultural diplomat”. The reader will therefore have to excuse me for referring rather to practical experiences than to academic discourses. However, given the fact that “Cultural Diplomacy” as a concept has a relatively short history, I feel that we first ought to define the components of the concept.

Definitions of Culture:

1. “**Culture**” could be defined as a description of the whole mankind, or even any sort of life and its development on Planet Earth.
2. In a slightly more limited definition “culture” is another word for “civilization” or “way of life”. Consequently “Cultural Anthropology” has become a very strong science, and so has “Cultural Geography”.
3. Given the strong role of Cities in human development “culture” often = “urban culture” or even “urban intellectual elites”.
4. Culture could also be about values or more precisely about “ethical values” or “aesthetic values”. In this definition culture is very much touching the field of politics and philosophy.
5. Particularly in Continental and Northern Europe “culture” is often defined as “High Culture”, sometimes = German “Bildung”, and meaning all forms of Arts, including literature, philosophy, performing arts and also “cultural history”, “cultural heritage” and Arts-related science (“humaniora”). “Ministers of Culture” or local “Cultural Mayors” are usually responsible for the Arts and not for any broader aspects of the concept. However, politicians responsible for Culture may also be involved in and trying to influence ongoing national discussions on “*Leitkultur*” – “Melting Pot Culture” – “Monoculture” – “Multiculturalism”, etc.
6. An example: The European Cultural Parliament, ECP, which I founded some 10 years ago, has as *members* outstanding representatives from the Arts (p. 5 above), but often chooses as *themes* very broad issues regarding the role of Europe in the world (p. 2-4 above). See www.kulturparlament.com

Definitions of Diplomacy:

1. “**Diplomacy**” was always clearly defined as the activity of diplomats on behalf of governments. A diplomat was the messenger or spokesman of Heads of State or governments. The mission was to convince another government or group of governments on certain issues regarding territory, trade rights or other strong national interests. Diplomats were mainly “negotiators”. In parallel a rather strong “ceremonial” aspect of diplomacy and International relations developed.
2. Since the Vienna Congress in 1815 there are clear Rules for diplomacy, its rights and duties, incl. rights and duties for embassies and diplomatic missions. These rules have been updated a few times in modern times, mainly in 1961 and particularly in the framework of the United Nations. (See Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations. United Nations Treaty Collection, rev. 2010)

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3. Normally the concept “diplomacy” has been limited to the relations between governments, but in the last 50+ years a diplomat is supposed to broaden his/her target group to encompass public organizations and – to some extent – also media, private companies which are commercially interesting and the civil society in the host country.
4. A “real diplomat” remains, by definition, only a person in the diplomatic service of a Foreign Ministry + a few persons with special competence (e.g. defense, agriculture, social affairs or culture/science). Diplomatic functions like “ambassador” have been borrowed by some International organizations in order to give a celebrity a role in the fight e.g. for human rights, refugees or other issues, generally considered as “good causes”, a win-win-project for the celebrity, the organization and – hopefully – the noble cause.
5. In daily life jargon you may call a person “diplomatic”, because he/she is negotiating, discussing or simply behaving in a polite, tactful or respectful way. This, however, does not make the person “a diplomat”. Having said this, I am aware that nobody has taken the “copyright” for diplomats, so the use of the term can be much broader than described above.
6. Traditionally the role of a diplomat could be both peaceful and “hostile”. Diplomats were the messengers of governments. Depending on the agenda of the government the diplomat could try to prepare a war or avoid a war or – in case of ongoing war – negotiate peace or cease-fire conditions.
7. A diplomat always had the role of promoting his/her country, its image, its “Nation Brand”. Today many governments have coordinating organizations for this task. Each embassy has nation branding as a major task. How this task is performed can be studied for instance in www.Sweden.se or www.Finland.fi or www.Denmark.dk or www.Norway.no

Cultural Diplomacy

So, how do we combine “Culture” and “Diplomacy”? What is the role of Cultural Diplomacy (hereinafter called CD) in contemporary and future International relations? The Institute for Cultural Diplomacy, ICD, has declared that the ultimate goal of cultural diplomacy is promoting peace and stability through intercultural relations. <http://www.culturaldiplomacy.org> CD is the important “soft” alternative to a more “belligerent” type of diplomacy. And CD utilizes the many instruments of cultural and artistic life in a way which may make “hearts and souls” meet across borders.

Most cultural counselors, cultural attachés or directors in embassies or cultural institutes around the world are probably not (yet) aware that they are doing “cultural diplomacy”. They have a job description asking them to promote arts, artists and the “cultural scene” of their home country, through exhibitions, concerts, lectures and other means of “cultural exchange”. Their success or failure is measured in the response from authorities and media and in number of visitors at the events. Some few, mainly European, diplomats may also have a word about “intercultural dialogue” in their job description. This advice is usually interpreted in the following way: We should be open for a dialogue or an exchange of experiences with the host country and various communities of the host country on issues regarding multiculturalism or integration of immigrants. European countries / EU-members obviously have much to discuss and compare and will benefit from such discussions.

The ICD ultimate goal – *peace and stability* – is a very ambitious goal. But it could be seen as a continuation of an old diplomatic tradition. The role of a diplomat was often to prevent war and try to preserve peace. The challenges in this role remain the same. There will always be conflicts between nations, regions or groups and they can be solved either peacefully or violently. Europeans (EU) have succeeded since 1945 to live in peace and cooperation and could therefore be called pioneers in *soft politics*. In 2012 the EU was awarded the Nobel Prize in Peace. But it was Mahatma Gandhi who taught us how to achieve a very important political goal (India’s independence) through *non-violence!*

To me “cultural diplomacy” is in a way the 21st Century version of the “*peaceful coexistence*” between the two blocs during the cold war 1947-1991. Peaceful coexistence between “East” and “West” or between communism and capitalism became necessary when both sides realized that they could destroy each other completely with their nuclear weapons. The coexistence was based on the so-called “terror balance” between the super powers. But the coexistence became an important basis for a considerable cultural exchange, which at times could even include

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exchange of ideas. There were some limits of tolerance or taboos, e.g. oppositional authors in the Soviet Union and – in certain periods – suspicion of “communists” in the United States, but generally speaking the area of exchange was rather broad and many programs successful. The relations were based on a considerable amount of mutual respect for each other. Important was that the Artists and other “cultural actors” felt that in music, dance or visual arts there are no – or only few – national or ideological borders.

When the Berlin wall and the iron curtain fell and the Soviet Union ceased to exist, the cold war was over. From 1991 we have a new world order. Professor Fukuyama called it “the end of history”. But Professor Huntington a few years later saw the new “vacuum in conflicts” to be filled by a “clash of civilizations” *Samuel Huntington: The Clash of Civilization and the Remaking of World Order, The Free Press 2002*

I see CD as an intelligent response to Huntington. Cultural Diplomacy has an important role to play. The question is, however: what role?

Some Options for Cultural Diplomacy:

- It seems that *Intercultural Dialogue* between cultures and religions could be the most important dimension of CD, with a considerable potential for further development, both in practice and in research,
- *Conflict solution* certainly could be seen as one aspect of CD, but we should be aware that there are many other well established international actors and research fields regarding conflicts, for instance the Peace Research Institutes like SIPRI, www.sipri.org and the International Crisis Group, www.crisisgroup.org
- *Non-violent* solutions to conflicts is mainly a UN task, but certainly need the backing of the *soft power* of CD,
- *Human Rights, including rights of women*, is a field with many actors and lobby groups, but the angle of CD certainly adds an important dimension in a field which, unfortunately, has seen too little progress in recent years.
- CD, not least an Institute like ICD, Berlin, could and should provide a *forum* for dialogue between diplomats, artists, politicians, media and civil society.
- CD should create intellectual *meeting places* for various cultures. Starting point: “The other” can be very intelligent. You may hate what he/she says, but he/she is not stupid. This goes for communists, tea party members, islamists, liberals, Chinese politburo members, European social democrats, African half-dictators or whatever group of human beings. We will not agree, we might hate what “the other” says, but a dialogue could still be helpful.
- CD as *Nation Branding* has a bright future. Many “young” nations have particular needs to develop strategies for a convincing nation branding based on CD (see above!).

Some Challenges:

- “Peace and Stability” is a complicated and sensitive combination, since stability is often achieved on the expense of opposition groups or freedom of expression. Most recent examples: Mubarak was considered a “stability factor” in the Middle East. And so was Gaddafi for the African Union. Both Russia and China are putting Stability as political top priority. Stability can sometimes be the opposite of Human Rights...
- How do you defend Human Rights through cultural diplomacy in countries like China or Russia, which are known to be rather allergic against the concept? Wouldn't they consider any efforts in defense of Human Rights as an “intervention into their internal affairs”? So the goal “stability” is complicated in a CD context.
- And how do we advocate equal rights for women through cultural diplomacy towards talibans or extreme islamists?
- One more **word of caution**: Very often *artists* will be happy to take part in manifestations of nation branding or CD in general, but we have to be aware that they might sometimes not like to be “*instrumentalized*” for the sake of CD.

Further Development of Cultural Diplomacy

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The potential for CD is great. The more the concept becomes accepted globally, the greater the need will be for institutes (like ICD) or scientific institutions *worldwide* to promote and analyze the role of CD in creating meeting places, in editing books and journals, as a main subject for research and comparing experiences and good practices. In official *diplomacy*, policies and practices of governments and embassies, the role of CD will continue to grow.

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Karl-Erik Norrman is founder (2002) and Secretary General of the European Cultural Parliament (ECP), the only Pan-European forum for cultural personalities of all sectors of Arts. As a Swedish diplomat for 30 years he served i. a. in Moscow, Peking, Geneva and Rome, dealing mainly with foreign policy, trade negotiations, cultural affairs, development cooperation and the United Nations. As Ambassador since 1989 he was posted in Spain and Swedish Commissioner General at EXPO 92 in Seville and in the 1990s head of the Cultural Department of the Ministry for Foreign Affairs. He is the author of more than 20 books about Democracy, World Population matters, Germany, China, India, UN (a novel), theatre, opera, design, food, European identities and football. In February 2013 his audio book on Verdi and Wagner as European symbols (in English) will be released in Stockholm and London.

About the author:

Karl-Erik Norrman is founder (2002) and Secretary General of the European Cultural Parliament (ECP), the only Pan-European forum for cultural personalities of all sectors of Arts. The ECP has 160 members from 43 European countries. The ECP initiates projects and workshops, meets in plenary session in different European cities each year and discusses broad European themes, such as Democracy, Intercultural dialogue, European Cohesion, Media quality, etc. As a Swedish diplomat for 30 years he served i. a. in Moscow, Peking, Geneva and Rome, dealing mainly with foreign policy, trade negotiations, cultural affairs, development cooperation and the United Nations. As Ambassador since 1989 he was posted in Spain and Swedish Commissioner General at EXPO 92 in Seville and in the 1990ies head of the Cultural Department of the Ministry for Foreign Affairs. From 1995 he was Executive Member of the Commission for Sweden Promotion Abroad at the MFA. Norrman has also been an opera soloist (tenor) and is the author of more than 20 books, i. a. about Democracy, World Population matters , Germany, China, India, UN (a novel), theatre, opera, design, food, European identities and football. In February 2013 his audio book on Verdi and Wagner as European symbols (in English) will be released in Stockholm and London. He participates in the public debate in Swedish, German, British, Scandinavian and other International media. He is member of several International Boards, e.g. Place Branding and Public Diplomacy, London, Institute of Cultural Diplomacy, Berlin, Vizar Architectural Competition, Sofia, Music Mind Trust, Sussex, Harald Edelstam Human Rights Foundation, Stockholm, Fondazione Love Difference, Biella. He is married to German opera singer Doris Soffel, has two children and lives in Stockholm and Berlin.