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Cultural Diplomacy

Edgard Telles Ribeiro

Experiences, Reflections and Insights

Before becoming a diplomat I was a journalist and film critic in Brazil. In the years that followed I started a parallel career as a writer, and have since published a few novels and collections of short stories. These particular circumstances have helped me focus on the importance of cultural matters, both from the perspective of a diplomat and that of a writer. So tonight, sometimes you will hear a diplomat talking, but now and then the writer will take over. This could account for some occasional surprises. But what else is new, when one speaks of culture?

In all these years dealing with this fascinating theme, I have often been saddened and frustrated to notice the neglect with which cultural relations tend to be addressed by politicians or members of the academic community - and even my own colleagues in the Foreign Service, be they Brazilian or diplomats from other countries. This perception is particularly distressing because I believe the roots of many of the problems we face in the international scene today are essentially cultural in nature, or culturally related. To me, this paradox represents a constant source of amazement and perplexity.

Yet, there are reasons for this. Because when one speaks of culture in the context of diplomacy, there is a general tendency to dismiss the topic as belonging to "the sunny side of foreign relations." This metaphor may sound nice and peaceful, but it also helps us understand why so few books on cultural diplomacy are available; cultural relations are not associated with crises, war, loss and destruction. The discipline is not taken very seriously, if compared to the basic themes usually discussed in the domain of foreign affairs.

The author of the "sunny side" metaphor I just quoted is an American scholar. His name is Philip Coombs and he wrote a book entitled *The Fourth Dimension of Foreign Policy: Educational and Cultural Affairs*. Here's what he said in the opening chapter of his book: "Cultural activities tend to get brushed aside, not only in the press but in the high places in governments, by the pressure of current crises. They occupy, as it were, the quiet, calm and sunny side of foreign relations, not the dramatic, stormy side."

Over the years, many authors have similarly complained about the tendency of the academic world to disregard the importance of cultural relations in the context of foreign affairs. A few even evoked some extreme concepts, such as xenophobia, to put

this theme in perspective and try to enhance its relevance. Among them, a scholar named Norman Daniel. In a book titled *The Cultural Barrier*, he made the following point. "Xenophobia, which divides people, actually unites them emotionally, because it is the common weakness of the human race."

Here is an expression to keep in mind tonight in this exchange of ours, "the common weakness of the human race." And indeed, ethnocentric or self-centered societies tend to see "the other" as "the enemy." Or, to say the least, as a potential threat. These perceptions explain many of the challenges we face today in some parts of the world. Challenges similar to the ones faced, one or two generations ago, by the two Super Powers during the years of the Cold War, when the "other" often meant "the potential aggressor."

Of course, one cannot compare the geopolitical circumstances of the Cold War with today's conflicts. Still, there is a common denominator, as often happens in cases of confrontation, and this common denominator is essentially, ignorance. Mistrust often escalates and generates fear or resentment. More often than not, hatred. But if one takes the trouble to examine a particular conflict and search for its distant causes, the seed of discord is often a very minor one - especially if compared to its devastating consequences.

In reality, the hatred that some races, ethnicities or even opposing political factions feel for one another results from endless layers of misperceptions, some of which may be old, others comparatively recent. The fact that each side vigorously claims to be the sole guardian of the truth proves this very point. (The point being that "truth", as we know, is a mysterious and elusive commodity).

In extreme and complex scenarios such as these, can culture help reduce tensions, and thus build bridges leading towards moderation? And what role can cultural diplomacy play in this particular context?

A major one, if only governments could become aware of it.

And why major? Because we live in an age of vague and porous borders. Globalization, seen as a threat by some, or as an unavoidable reality by most, is here to stay and will expand at a faster rate than we could possibly imagine today.

As a consequence distances can no longer be measured in geographical terms, but in cultural terms. In other words, in terms of affinities; or the lack of them. In terms of openness, or suspicion. This, in turn, brings us to the front door of cultural relations.

Cultural relations, as we well know, are not an invention of our times. We are not discussing a recent phenomenon, or something created by globalization. The vast

majority of greater cultures, throughout history, were formed through the influence of other cultures. Borrowing was an inevitable part of this process. The influence of philosophers, artists and thinkers has always crossed frontiers.

From the Athens of Pericles to the Medieval University, from the Italian Renaissance to the revolutions of the 18th and 19th centuries, from the wealth of knowledge of the many civilizations born in Asia to the wonders of Old Egypt, or the Inca and Mayan Empires, a sort of spontaneous universality has always been around us, to a smaller or greater degree. In some cases, stimulated by princes, popes or kings, in others in spite of their objections.

What makes it different today is the speed with which this knowledge criss-crosses the world, and the role governments play in directing this cultural flow. Some governments know how to benefit from this continuous source of wealth - derived from their cultural presence beyond their borders.

Others, particularly in the Third World, are so burdened by different priorities that they neglect to emphasize their culture as a major asset to the regional and international community. They hesitate to invest in this domain, finding it extremely difficult to commit the necessary human and financial resources to projects that often seem a waste of time and money.

When I wrote my thesis on cultural diplomacy, some years ago, I remember France used to spend around \$1 billion annually on cultural activities, whereas Brazil rarely spent more than \$1 million annually, and there was no excuse for this disparity.

Having said that, we can now establish a major difference between cultural relations and cultural diplomacy. We might say that cultural relations are the spontaneous flow of information that has always been present in the community of nations, whether governments liked it or not; and that cultural diplomacy would consist of the use of cultural relations as an instrument of foreign policy.

In other words, nations - or at least some nations - take advantage of the spontaneous flow of cultural exchange, and add to them. They go with the flow, so to speak. They do so by designing specific projects to be shown in some parts of the world where, for whatever reason, they want to be better represented. They act - and this is very important - without expecting quick returns on these investments.

In fact, cultural diplomacy only works well if its objectives remain invisible. In other words, if it is not perceived as a ploy to achieve a given result. (This is very hard for our bureaucrats to understand, as they are used to provide funds for visible projects, such as trade fairs, technical cooperation programs, scholarships, etc. How then, could they be asked to provide funds for "invisible" objectives)?

Thus, cultural diplomacy represents a long-term investment, with no guaranteed dividends. What it does, and it does beautifully, is something less tangible: it helps to create a positive atmosphere around the nation whose culture it promotes.

Many First World countries, as I said, use this toll as a relevant part of their foreign policy. The interesting thing is some of these countries manage to project themselves in a way that far exceeds their real importance in the international arena.

In other words, by successfully projecting their values, they are seen by the international community to be far more important than they actually are, politically or economically speaking. They transmit the illusion of power, a power they often no longer have, in comparison to other countries that do not rely on the same methods, and are therefore perceived as being less relevant.

Here is another interesting perspective from which to examine these themes: to some countries, cultural diplomacy turned out to be a vital instrument to correct negative perceptions caused by their participation in conflicts or wars. Take, for instance, Germany or Japan after World War II. In the mid fifties and early sixties, as these countries were slowly getting back on their feet, both of them embarked on a systematic program of cultural promotion abroad, and invested heavily in this domain, the Germans with the network of the Goethe Institutes, the Japanese with the creation of the Japanese Foundation.

The Japanese Foundation alone spent fortunes in the US focusing on every possible aspect of that nation's culture, from industrial design to film, from literature to gastronomy, from martial arts to silk artistry. There is hardly a street in a major US urban center today that does not feature at least one Japanese restaurant, something completely unheard of in this country in the sixties or early seventies.

As a result of the investments made in their image, both nations were able to modify the negative perception they shared in the aftermath of World War II. In so doing, they paved the way to present themselves in a completely different light, one that reflected their long standing values - the ones that, presumably, the war years had put aside.

Half a century ago, political analysts and diplomats could perhaps afford to disregard the importance of cultural diplomacy. They could be excused for this major oversight. Not anymore, though. In 1945, when the UN was created, there were roughly fifty countries in existence. In 1965, around the time I was studying to join the Brazilian Foreign Ministry, 120. Today there are almost 200. The world's population is growing at a rate of 140 million per year (the vast majority of which, 125 million, coming from the developing world).

Each morning, we wake up to face an amazing convergence of revolutions in practically all fields of human knowledge which the Internet spreads around. Progress in all domains, be they scientific, technical or economic, has never been more astounding than today. We deal with an excess of information, which defy the imagination and often leave us powerless in the midst of such excess.

The picture is further complicated by a common vulnerability to major problems that are no longer perceived as national issues, but seen as transnational challenges, such as ecological threats, transmission of diseases of epidemic proportions, organized crime, stock-market crashes engulfing all our economies simultaneously, and so on.

Against this complex and fluid background, it is easy to understand that, in the near future, the well-being, and even the survival, of some nations may depend on how well they perform transnationally. The less known a country, the lesser its chances of competing, the lesser its possibilities of having its views heard or respected. A nation can become less relevant for lack of visibility, regardless of its real importance. And it can easily become irrelevant, regardless of the wealth of its own culture.

And just how do you make your presence felt outside your own borders? You could rely on your military might, if that's your geopolitical option, and if you can afford the weapons. Or you could count on trade, if you excel in that particular domain. Or on a strictly political agenda, devising strategic alliances to keep your enemies at bay. Or on technical cooperation projects, which represent a good link between countries. Or, as often is the case, on a combination of all of the above. But, except for the military option, which should be ruled out in the context of our discussions, all of the other agendas (political, economic, commercial, etc.) could be greatly enhanced if the country's cultural background was better known beyond its borders.

Why, you may wonder? For a simple reason: no other instrument available to us can be perceived as a part of the common heritage of humankind. Culture, having no frontiers, and being such a diversified manifestation of human nature (and sometimes human genius), is charged with subjective and symbolic meaning. Although created in a specific country, it is usually accepted as belonging to all, and not only to that specific country.

In this regard, Beethoven is much more than a German composer, and Picasso has long ceased to be a Spanish painter. Both happen to be among our favorite artists. They do not belong to any given country or culture. After all, some geniuses transcend not only their countries, but also their very culture. The pyramids do not fascinate us because they happen to be located in Egypt, nor does the Acropolis, Angkor Wat or Macchu Picchu inspire us because they are part of Greece, Cambodia or Peru. They inspire us, like music moves us, from Bach to The Beatles - because they reflect Humankind at its best.

The same can be said of writers, who take us, by the sheer power of their imagination, to the very heart of their countries and to other countries as well; of architects, who keep marveling us with their audacity; of anyone, in fact, who transports us to higher dimensions, from art to folklore, from gastronomy to sports. For culture, as the great English poet T.S. Eliot once reminded us, "...is everything that makes life worth living."

It is this feeling of belonging, of being part of a higher sphere of human achievements, that makes culture so appealing to us all. Culture does not intimidate (as a military presence often intimidates), nor does it oppress (as economic tensions often do), nor does it lead to competition, as so many of our other activities end up doing. On the contrary, culture seduces, amuses, gets to us emotionally, makes us think - and makes us feel as part of a whole. No other human-made activity has the same power, a power that has to do with radiance, rather than strength.

In a nutshell, one could say the political aspects of diplomacy have a political agenda in mind; trade diplomacy concentrates on increasing commercial results; technical cooperation focuses on expanding specific areas of knowledge; and so on and so forth.

Cultural diplomacy, on the other hand, goes far beyond: not only does it pursue its own objectives (which are to promote one's culture in other countries), but it also helps, indirectly, to create a favorable atmosphere which in turn, paves the way for other priorities of a bilateral agenda, including commercial or political ones.

Speaking as a Brazilian, I would add that developing countries should invest more aggressively in this domain, to protect themselves more efficiently outside their frontiers, so that they can better support their foreign policy objectives, whatever they may be. There is simply no doubt in my mind about the long-term effectiveness of such a choice.

The same obviously goes for the key players in the international scene, as is the case of the US and other European nations. Some of them, as I mentioned, invest in culture as part of their foreign policy objectives. But if they could be convinced to go a step further, and open themselves to the cultures of other nations, our planet would be in a far better shape than it is today. Culture, like trade, is a two-way avenue. To do so, these countries would only need to invest just a small fraction of what they spend on weapons and military equipment and personnel.

In the aftermath of World War II, Senator J. William Fulbright, who introduced the legislation that established the Fulbright Program in 1946, was among the first to summon the necessity to reconsider our priorities in this domain. This is what he said in the sixties, more than half a century ago - and I stress this point, more than half a century ago:

The shape of the world a generation from now will be influenced far more by how well we communicate the values of our society to others than by our military or diplomatic superiority.

A generation from now, he said, way back in the mid sixties. That's when most of your parents were born - and we are all still waiting...

Still, just think how much Senator Fulbright's words apply to the international scene these days. In a world where military solutions tend to leave on their wake a heritage of resentment and hate, how much better wouldn't our chances be if governments could concentrate on values, and invest on long term projects rooted in education and cultural information?

Some of you might ask at this point: *OK, but in practical terms, speaking of the real world we live in, what role, if any, can cultural diplomacy really play to reduce tensions in many of the troubling scenarios confronting us?*

We obviously cannot go in a discussion of world affairs tonight, not even in very broad terms. But you are all aware that we live in an era of shifting landscapes, when compared to the days, say, of the Cold War. The fall of the Berlin Wall, the demise of communism in Europe, and the tensions created by this transition; the emergence of China as a major key player in world affairs; the end of dictatorships in South American countries; the possibilities of change in some parts of the Arab World; the ever-present phenomenon of globalization; the people taking a front role in decision-making issues in some countries; nuclear proliferation happening in others; the threats of violence bordering on anarchy - all these elements, some good some bad, and others unpredictable, keep unfolding around us, and taking us almost by surprise.

Add to this another background, that of poverty with its in-built arsenal of ignorance and injustice fueling resentment; and religious fanaticism, raising the levels of incomprehension to a degree unheard of in recent times - and what emerges from this vast canvas is an almost abstract landscape, full of shapes and patterns that often defy our imagination.

So what are we to do? As a diplomat, I happen to be an optimist by trade, and as a writer, I am a bit of a dreamer. I believe that, as members of our society (in your case, as active members of the academic community), we cannot afford to remain indifferent to the events taking place in the international scene, if for no other reason than because many of them have a direct impact on our own realities.

To some extent we all have to find ways to contribute, from a practical or intellectual point of view, to this common exercise of awareness. And isn't this precisely what we are doing here tonight? Isn't this what Lesley has been doing for 25 years with its

program of Intercultural Relations? Fostering mutual respect and cooperation among people of different cultures?

As for the front lines of foreign affairs (at the United Nations or elsewhere), whenever there is a chance for dialogue, small though it may be, it is my personal conviction that culture should always be an important part of any political or economic package being put on the table. The curiosity and respect for the culture of others should match the pride we take in ours. When it comes to building bridges between peoples, nothing eclipses the perception of the common heritage.

So here is the question we should be asking ourselves: given the alarms raised over the years by scholars and diplomats about the cultural causes of some of the conflicts confronting us, how can one explain the fact that the foreign policy priorities of First World countries for so many regions have consistently focused on political, economic, and military targets only?

These are the subjects that have been extensively analyzed in books and specialized reports: political, economic and military priorities. They are the ones that capture financial resources and command everyone's attention. Not that these topics do not deserve the priorities they command. Of course they do. After all, they reflect the realities around us, the crises, the challenges, the fears we all share. But, and here is my point, should they be the only ones? Isn't there another way to examine foreign relations, other than through the lenses of violence and fear, or economic challenges and military intimidation?

Few politicians pause to consider a very simple anthropological truth, namely, that if different people knew more about what makes them unique (and, as a consequence, began to understand what makes other people unique), the mistrust which often feeds tension, and also leads to crises and conflicts, would be immensely reduced.

They would not disappear, but overall, their negative impact would be smaller in comparison, and we would probably witness a smoother flow of dialogue between opposing factions, compared to the threats, insults and screaming we hear today.

Call it idealism if you will, but if you bear in mind the opening words of the Charter of UNESCO, you will be in a better position to understand what I mean. These words, as some of you may remember, are: *Since wars begin in the minds of men, it is the minds of men that the defenses of peace must be constructed.*

And how can anyone get in the minds of men, other than through what is perceived as a common heritage of all?

Thank you.

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**Please note that most of these books were used for the preparation of my own thesis on Cultural Diplomacy in 1989, and may therefore be out of print. Books in Portuguese have been eliminated from this list.*

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