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Models as Mirrors or Cultural Diplomacy? [1]

Several years ago I organized a conference designed to encourage those involved in the work of cultural diplomacy – policy makers, practitioners and cultural producers, public diplomacy officers, and academics; who too seldom talk to one another – to generate a shared conversation about what in fact composes this enterprise. The conversation was framed to promote discussion of "the specific role of culture in cultural diplomacy." That is, participants were asked to address what they took "culture" to mean in this context in the first place and to characterize its efficacy: what did they imagine "culture" does as part of the work of diplomacy?

At the same time I launched a cultural diplomacy survey, together with my then research assistant Yelena Osipova. This short survey was open-ended, and designed to provide opportunity for respondents – primarily active and retired U.S. public diplomacy officers – to articulate their own understandings of the work of cultural diplomacy. Put another way, the survey encouraged elaboration of their *emic* instead of my etic understanding of this effort. How do those regularly engaged in cultural diplomacy define to themselves the meaning of what they do?

The survey vexed some practitioner colleagues, who nevertheless graciously completed it. One esteemed but exasperated doyen of public diplomacy was moved to comment, "I am delighted to help but disappointed that I am asked such obvious questions." But this was exactly the point. Over the previous decade numerous reports have been produced, with the purpose of assessing the state of U.S. public and cultural diplomacy. But these reports rarely subject "cultural diplomacy" to sustained explication or justification. They assume its virtues and typically offer perfunctory definitions before hurrying on to their primarily purpose: defending budgets or exploring new institutional reforms.

An uncharitable commentator might call that just so much moving around of chairs in a way that fails regularly to revisit the fundamental meaning of what we think we are up to with line items like "cultural diplomacy." That "person-to-person exchange" using the arts foregrounds "commonalities in human experience" instead of "exploiting political and cultural differences" – thus advancing diplomacy – might hold promise. The work of cultural diplomacy might indeed foster "mutual understanding." But it is not a certainty. In fact exactly the reverse often happens.

And as the survey itself made clear, in fact there exists very little consensus among those involved about what cultural diplomacy is, except in the most general of terms. In what follows, and in subsequent posts, I offer a preliminary analysis of survey results in order to sketch out some key questions relating to the *semiotics* of diplomacy that deserve more sustained consideration. With "semiotics," I continue to focus attention on the specific relationship of culture to communication, as the crux of the matter and in keeping with my previous writing about how to pursue a thoroughly dialogic cultural diplomacy. The goal here is not to establish "best practices" but to ascertain practitioners' own working models for what

they do as a way to encourage further attention to where U.S. cultural diplomacy practitioners are speaking from, when they engage in their work.

There were a total of 151 respondents of whom 51 completed the survey, administered online between late 2009 and late 2011. The survey was composed of seven questions, and respondents' answers took narrative form, and were often quite elaborated. Here I address only question 2, "What is the meaning of 'culture' for cultural diplomacy?"

Among the 51 respondents who completed the survey, one immediately apparent result is that there was tremendous variability in defining "culture" in this context. Breaking this out, respondents offered 21 different potential synonyms (e. g. "world view," "ideology," or "structure of meaning"), 22 candidates corresponding to the basic units of culture (e. g. "values," "beliefs," or "symbols,"), and 31 possible expressions of culture (e.g. "music," "art," or "film"). It was also notable that multiple respondents answered the question with a tautology, using "culture" or "cultural" in the definition. Perhaps out of frustration, one respondent succinctly answered, "It means what it means."

For someone trained in sociocultural anthropology, this is familiar data. And it is not surprising. As the Welsh critic Raymond Williams noted in *Keywords*, "Culture is one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language." Policy reports on the state of cultural diplomacy point to different things, sometimes emphasizing a concern for "creative products" and at other times for "ideas and ideals." Among commentators on cultural diplomacy, Cynthia Schneider is among the few to consider implications of the fact that, as she noted, "The word 'culture' conveys multiple meanings." She goes on to explore the diplomatic consequences of the anthropologically-inspired conception of culture as "customs and behavior" and as "creative expression" respectively.

Notably, the discipline of anthropology has given up the effort to produce a consensus definition of what has been, arguably, its master concept. Since its professionalization as a social science, anthropology has moved from a "kitchen sink" variety of definition, simply listing out an ever lengthening set of cultural "traits" – which reached its height with the Human Relations Area File project – to varieties of increasingly incompatible schools, each with a definition fit to a narrower purpose (e. g. "the study of behavior" or "the symbols and meaning" approach). By the 1950s, a pair of eminent anthropologists recorded no less than 164 different definitions of culture then in use by their colleagues. By the end of the twentieth century, the discipline, as a whole, had thoroughly qualified its use of the term – culture – to refer not to any "complex whole" or total "way of life," as one survey respondent defined it. Most recently, it has emphasized the ways cultures are sites of struggle over contested meanings, including over culture itself.

In the context of diplomacy, by assuming we mean the same thing by "culture," we are less apt to consider or to apprehend the sources of cultural difference. We think: their art and our art might not be exactly the same, but it is still "art." But this thinking amounts to a kind of mirror imaging. These differences also can be sources of conflict. They include notable differences among countries about the relationship of culture to diplomacy and about the location of culture in international affairs. To ignore these differences is to risk ignoring what matters, from the point of view of the publics for whom cultural diplomacy programs are intended.

By way of conclusion, I offer three examples from recent history: The so-called "Asian values debate" of the 1990s over the global application of human rights standards was a

case of East Asian nations characterizing human rights not as universal but as a cultural project. This, the U.S. rejected, and along with it any sustained consideration of culture as a rights-based concept. In the mid-2000s U.S. negotiators surprisingly found themselves at cross-purposes with their European and Canadian allies over a proposed UNESCO cultural diversity treaty, in no small part because the U.S. resisted an understanding of cultural goods and services as in any way "exceptional." In this case, the fault line was between a U.S. framing of the issue as about "freedom of expression," as compared to a European concern for the cultural goods and services associated with national "identity."

Finally, a strong case can be made that the influence of "clash of civilizations" thinking upon U.S. policy for confronting post-9/11 global challenges was counterproductively distorted and narrow, shaping how urgent problems were framed for understanding. As such, the Department of Defense's Minerva Initiative, its new social scientific research program, assumed a causal relation between religious conviction and political violence, as part of its invitation to study the significance of religious change in the Islamic world. But as one commentator of the program has suggested, this appeared to be an example of an "American solipsism that is driving this definition of threats." In other words, "clash of civilizations" might less describe what is happening in the world and more reflect a peculiar U.S. suspicion about the cultural sources of conflict.

The common thread here is the problem of a lack of attention to where other people are coming from, with respect to culture. One important part of this is that to engage with the question of culture is less an appreciation of different "ways of life" and more a case of appreciating culture as a site of meaningful struggle. International affairs are informed by multiple definitions and locations for culture, together with variable understandings of rights, of identity, and of the sources of violence. Cultural diplomacy takes place within this field of often competing conceptions, as much a potential source of shared goodwill as of misunderstanding or conflict.