Published on *USC Center on Public Diplomacy* (https://uscpublicdiplomacy.org)

Nov 04, 2016 by Robert Albro

Cultural Diplomacy's Representational Conceit [1]

This post continues my preliminary discussion of the results of a survey I recently conducted, designed to invite practitioners of cultural diplomacy to reflect upon their own practice. Additional discussion of this survey can be found in my February 15th post. As I noted in the earlier post, this analysis is less about criticizing or evaluating cultural diplomacy, and more about arriving at a better understanding of the key assumptions underwriting it. How do those regularly engaged in cultural diplomacy define to themselves the meaning of what they do? This includes how practitioners imagine the relation of culture to successful communication and whether this prevailing understanding promotes a more thoroughly dialogic engagement.

In addition to a notable lack of consensus among cultural diplomacy practitioners about the meaning of "culture" itself, as reported in my previous post, respondents' survey answers tended to promote what I will call diplomacy's representational conceit. That is, a majority of respondents assumed that in the diplomatic mode cultures – typically, national cultures as self-evident and as the proper subject of diplomacy – are unproblematically expressively available to others for the purpose of representing a people. And this representational conceit assumes the "message" (or the cultural "value" the message is intended to convey) effectively explains a society in question to international publics, a message that is easily expressed and extractable from its "vehicle" (e. g. an art form, musical performance, or poetry slam). This assumption is widespread, as a recent report by the International Cultural Engagement Task Force illustrates, noting, "It is in cultural activities that a nation's idea of itself is best represented."

Respondents also appeared convinced of this idea, describing "cultures" as the ways different peoples "express themselves." Again, culture is the "presentation" of "a society's thoughts and values." Or, a culture is a community's "outlook." The arts are "expressions of American society." As was noted, cultural diplomacy is "the efforts nations make to portray their societies and values." It is a case of the "projection" of culture abroad. Likewise, "The best way to explain our culture is by putting it on display." It is effective when using "the most visible forms of outreach to large audiences." Another respondent asserted that cultural diplomacy is a case of "explaining" by "demonstrating." It is effective when it helps people elsewhere "gain a firsthand view" or a "more accurate picture" of American culture. A majority of respondents described the successful communication of cultural diplomacy as analogous to effective visual representation, as a "show," and historically this has characterized much such work.

When prompted to offer examples of the activities of cultural diplomacy, respondents favored the performative and visual arts, such as exhibitions, motion pictures, radio programs, T.V. broadcasts, music, dance, theater, the plastic arts, and similar activities. And this should not be surprising, since such activities have been the focus of cultural diplomacy programming for some time. Richard Arndt has offered vivid details about the work of the cultural offices of U.S.

embassies during the Cold War, which was “to publicize, present, and stage events.” Arndt characterizes the diplomatic efforts to “internationalize America’s arts” as a case of “the U.S. export of performances,” which, it was hoped, were a “highly visible” means to expose international audiences to, in Arndt’s words, the “sounds and sights of democracy.”

In keeping both with the history and practice of cultural diplomacy, then, respondents equated cultural performance with acts of expression primarily intended for representation (usually of “American society” or desirable American “values” like “freedom of expression”). Respondents directly associated the effectiveness of culture for diplomacy with understanding it as a representational medium. In so doing they took for granted that cultural expression is portable, self-evident, and contextless, and so available for acts of exchange and performance. They also appeared to accept that the representational purpose of such efforts was effective communication. Cultural values – as transparently expressed through diverse cultural vehicles of performance like the arts – were understood to be relatively straightforwardly extractable by international “audiences.” But why do we think this?

The elision by respondents of acts of cultural diplomacy with acts of representation is reminiscent of Suzanne Langer’s discussion of “presentational symbols.” She describes these as presenting otherwise abstract “ideas” because they correspond in form or by analogy to that which is symbolized, as a “projection” of it. Presentational symbols function independently and they work all at once like a “picture.” Langer’s conception reflects a long-standing philosophical commitment, the so-called correspondence theory of truth. But there is a critique of this view. For Richard Rorty, the representational theory, where knowledge is acquired through a process of “mirroring,” mistakenly proceeds as if meaning is like a picture that faithfully “represents.” Rorty has made a strong case that we are better off treating this representational theory as our own folk theory of what’s going on. Such a representational conceit, in other words, might not be shared across communities or internationally in the same ways.

But the work of cultural diplomacy has been consistent in this regard. As with the Department of State’s smART Power program, which sends U.S. artists abroad to create “public art projects” as an example of “people-to-people diplomacy through the visual arts,” we think national “cultural ambassadors” are engaged in comparable sorts of representational spectacle. Historically, this has been the case, whether hip-hop diplomacy, or the USIA’s erstwhile “Arts America” program. Notably, the justification for an “Arts Diplomacy Festival” soon to take place in Berlin is that “cultural diplomacy must show rather than tell.” In each case, whether as part of the formal program or tour, or as part of the more informal interactions on the margins of such programs, individual cultural or arts ambassadors are thought to be showing, expressing, performing, picturing, presenting, mirroring, and in this way creating audiences for the uniquely desirable values of one country or another.

And this is hardly unique to U.S. cultural diplomacy. UNESCO’s “Living Human Treasures” program is a particularly notable example of representation run amok. This program, first proposed in 1993, identifies and confers official recognition upon particular individuals, as culture bearers deemed to possess intangible cultural heritage that is at once scarce (and so, threatened) and particularly representative of a specific group, community or nation. These are, typically, cultural “practices and expressions,” the development and transmission of which UNESCO promotes by providing duly designated “human treasures” with regular opportunities to perform, demonstrate, or exhibit them, and so to build a larger audience for them. That is, “human treasures” are supposed to receive “public recognition.” As living embodiments of a community’s intangible cultural heritage, human treasures are granted the dubious honor of

being cultural ambassadors for life. They are reduced to the role of representatively mirroring something assumed to be essential about the life of his or her community.

There is nothing wrong with any of this per se. Artists, musicians, poets, and other performers, should circulate internationally. But why do we also believe that they carry the representational burden of the nation, as a set of shared values? And why do we think they effectively communicate, say, the sights and sounds of democracy in the U.S.?

There is good reason to think that, whatever happens as a part of these expressive or performative opportunities, cultural diplomacy as display and for the creation of an audience is in fact not the best route to intercultural dialogue. The effort to perform, express, and project, might succeed in conjuring an audience among international publics, but in so doing this can also build barriers to conversation. An audience member watches the show but is seldom an active participant in it. Audience members occupy another world than that of the players. The representational conceit of diplomacy might inhibit dialogue, in other words, when publics are recruited as audiences for cultural spectacles.