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Aspiring To An Interest-Free Cultural Diplomacy? [1]

When I hear from people about the relative advantages of cultural diplomacy, they often point to the apparent "neutrality" or "apolitical" basis of, say, cultural exchange. Coming from an anthropological background, this often advanced claim has always puzzled me.

At least historically, when anthropologists have talked about cultures – for example, in the typical mode of cultural relativism – they have referred to the ways that different cultures are either configurations of specific "values" or interpret the world around them in distinct ways. And, if this is not exactly how I would encourage us to think about the culture concept today, it is precisely because the meanings people ascribe to things in the world vary so much across cultures that we seek to take account of cultures in the first place. When we refer to "neutrality" in the context of cultural diplomacy, then, it is often unclear how this reconciles with cultural difference.

I am actually pretty sure that the problem of cultural difference is not intentionally being dismissed by these frequent assertions about the relative neutrality of cultural diplomacy. But, I do think that we might be mixing things up here and that we could more rigorously sort out what in fact we are talking about.

Respondents to a cultural diplomacy survey I conducted described some of its advantages this way: Cultural diplomacy is successful because "it is not there to sell a product." And there is "no message control." It is typically "most effective when it is politically neutral, non-confrontational and non-ideological." It is effective when it is "free of state-to-state interests." And it tends to be ineffective or it fails when trying to "push a policy position" or "when deeply contested interests limit the impact of cultural diplomacy activities." In a nutshell, the idea is that when cultural diplomacy efforts are perceived as too obviously entangled with "interests" they run the risk of illegitimacy, and so, ineffectiveness.

Policy recommendations for cultural diplomacy also reflect this equation. A White House conference on cultural diplomacy in 2000 touts its advantages because cultural diplomacy "relates to human creativity beyond the scope of politics." The Advisory Committee on Cultural Diplomacy's 2005 report confidently notes the ways cultural diplomacy "creates a neutral platform for people-to-people contact." A 2007 Demos report likewise asserts, "The value of cultural activity comes precisely from its independence." As such, culture is a "safe space for unofficial political relationship-building." And as a 2010 report by the Robert Sterling Clark Foundation on cultural exchange programs recently emphasized, these exchanges can "remain apolitical."

"Neutral," as these several reports make clear, is most often contrasted with "political." As Cynthia Schneider suggests, the advantage of cultural diplomacy – particularly in the form of citizen diplomacy – is that it provides an "alternative to the official presence of America."

And, indeed, critics of government-sponsored U.S. cultural diplomacy have pointed to the ways the involvement of the State Department – or during the Cold War, the CIA – have tended to politicize, and so undermine the credibility of, U.S. cultural diplomacy. Neutral-as-apolitical, then, is set against the perception of the pursuit of so-called "national interests" in the competition among nations.

But if we are not careful, neutral-as-apolitical can invite confusion, as seems to be the case with Joseph Nye's counterintuitive conclusion in his most recent treatment of the problem of power, where he observes that "the best propaganda is not propaganda." We think we know what Nye probably means here: cultural diplomacy is effective when the "culture" part of the intervention is understood to be authentic and credible. It cannot be viewed as contrived or as having an ulterior motive – as Frances Stonor Saunders's story of clandestine CIA sponsorship of American artists and intellectuals during the Cold War makes clear. Indeed, as Richard Arndt and others have reminded us, it is important to try to rescue "the diplomacy of cultures from the embrace of propaganda."

However, we also need to take account of the fact that at least beginning with the end of the Cold War the "culture" of diplomacy has significantly changed its location as well as its meaning. If the 2000 White House cultural diplomacy conference unproblematically assigns culture to the activities of "human creativity," a 2008 report by the Curb Center points to a more recent trend of the supplanting of a cosmopolitan notion of "culture" as the output of artistic and intellectual elites by an increasingly pervasive understanding of "cultures" in the anthropological sense. This shift is evident, for example, in the recent multilateral promotion of the concept of "intangible cultural heritage," as generationally transferrable and community-based, over and above the previous international consensus for tangible heritage represented by such landmarks as the 1954 Hague Convention.

And when culture – as universal creative expression – is folded into an anthropological conception of different cultures, cultural diplomacy becomes more like an ongoing series of transactions across frontiers resembling intercultural communication. On either side of these frontiers, we suppose, are relatively different configurations of cultural values.

Part of what is conveyed in claims about the potential neutrality of cultural diplomacy is that we can sort out expressions of culture from the narrow pursuit of interests or political advantage, in the competition among nations. But, while realist accounts of international affairs often assume that politics are driven by competitive self-interest, it is nevertheless a mistake to assume any such interests are at the same time value-neutral. In his classic discussion, the American anthropologist Marshall Sahlins demonstrated the impossibility of, in his words, separating out the "utilitarian postulates of practical interest" from the "system of symbolic valuations" – i.e. culture – that invest such an interest with meaning.

The politics of our own culture wars in the U.S. should serve as a ready reminder of this. The very notion of a culture war is based upon the premise that so-called "values voters" are motivated to patrol the borders of a particular definition of moral community in ways commensurate with public life in an otherwise diverse society. When controversies over the public appropriateness of cultural expression are touched off in the U.S., as with the case of the Sensation art exhibition at the Brooklyn Museum several years ago or in the more recent decision by the Smithsonian Institution to censor the video artwork "A Fire in My Belly," the difference between what constitutes public interest and what, cultural values, is nowhere to be found. And, of course, it is also that way everywhere else in the world.

Put another way, rather than understanding “interests” to be value-neutral, and as distinct from more authentically credible expressions of culture in diplomacy, we might do better to give our attention to the ways that values determine interests. We might consider how cultural expressions in international affairs are value-laden. In other words, proceeding as if cultural diplomacy is a relatively neutral and apolitical way to build bridges that enable later and more frank dialogue about national interests is likely to cause us to ignore some of the unexpected cultural value commitments – if not narrow national interests, interests nonetheless – that account for the differences we are seeking to bridge in the first place.

The difference between propaganda and an interested or value-laden cultural diplomacy is that the former seeks to manipulate publics, often through purposeful distortion or by withholding key facts, to the end of control. Perhaps, then, the important distinction is not between neutral or apolitical, on the one hand, and interests or values, on the other, so much as between interests or values and manipulation or control. Cultural diplomacy cannot honestly avoid the former – and why should it? But it should take no part in the latter.