

CULTURAL DIPLOMACY:
AN INSTRUMENT OF FOREIGN POLICY

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Good afternoon. I am here today to discuss cultural diplomacy as an instrument of foreign policy, and share with you some thoughts on this relevant theme. Before becoming a diplomat I was a journalist and a film critic in Brazil. And in the years that followed, I also started a writing career. These circumstances have helped me see the importance of cultural matters, both as a diplomat and as a writer and critic.

In the Brazilian Foreign Ministry, I have dedicated a number of years of my career to the cultural department, either in Brasilia, or supervising the cultural sections of the Embassies where I worked. As a result of this experience, I wrote a thesis on cultural diplomacy, which was later published as a book in Brazil. Needless to say, it never became a best-seller – not even among my own colleagues. But in these last few years, the book gained a few readers. And this gave me the idea to insist, and go on speaking about these issues, whenever the opportunity arose.

When one speaks of culture in the context of international relations, there is a general tendency to dismiss the topic as belonging in the “sunny side of foreign relations”. This metaphor, which is not an invention of mine, 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, wars, loss and destruction. They are not taken very seriously, if compared with the basic themes of international relations.

The author of the “**sunny side**” metaphor I just quoted is an American scholar, Philip Coombs. He wrote a book entitled, quite appropriately, “The Fourth Dimension of Foreign Policy: Educational and Cultural Affairs”. (The other three dimensions would be the usual ones, namely political, economic and military.) Here is what he actually said: “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 other authors have similarly complained about the tendency of the academic world to disregard the importance of cultural relations in the context of international relations. A few even invoked some extreme contexts, such as xenophobia, to put this theme in perspective. Such was the case of a scholar named Norman Daniel, who, in his book titled “The cultural barrier”, raises the following question: “Xenophobia, which divides people, actually unites them emotionally, because it is the common weakness of the human race”. According to these views, ethnocentric or self-centered societies would tend to view “the other” as the enemy. Or, to say the least, as a potential threat.

However pessimistic this view might appear to be, the hate or fear that some races or ethnicities may have of others is often proved to be true. And here, again, we see the role that cultural information could and should play, in order to address this “common weakness”. Or, at least, to study it in the context of foreign policy.

Before we proceed, it might be interesting to hear what another scholar had to say on these topics. His name is Charles Frankel, and he wrote a book called “The neglected Aspect of Foreign Affairs”. Here are some of his comments: “Understanding” (another culture) “is an ambiguous term; when applied to relations between human beings, it sometimes stands for the growth of sympathy among them, but it also sometimes stands merely for their capacity to describe and explain their fellow’s attitude and behavior. Indeed, it is possible to understand him and to recognize, precisely because you understand him, that his interests and ideals are opposed to your own”.

Indeed, wars have taken place between states which understood each other completely. But if, over the years, a consistent cultural effort had been undertaken in such cases, who can tell if the confrontation would have really happened? Anything that can provide a potential enemy with a larger picture of the country he considers a threat tends to help. Because these efforts contribute to reduce misinformation and prejudice, thus leading to understanding and dialogue.

The very titles of the books I just quoted to you speak eloquently about the secondary role politicians usually attribute to culture in the context of foreign relations. Just listen to some of them: “The Fourth Dimension of Foreign Policy”; “The cultural barrier”; “The neglected Aspect of Foreign Affairs”. These titles clearly indicate that the authors were dealing with a theme most scholars tend to dismiss. They chose to highlight their frustration on the very covers of their books...

Yet, a growing number of scholars, diplomats, and members of the academic community have consistently advocated in favor of giving culture its place in the first row of international relations. After the Second World War, Senator Fulbright was among the first to summon the necessity to reconsider our priorities in this domain. Here is what he said – fifty years ago, and I stress that point, fifty years 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.”

How much this applies to the international scene these days... And how much better we would have fared, if these ideas had indeed been more actively incorporated in the foreign policies of world powers half a century ago. And not only world powers: in all countries, for that matter, big or small, rich or poor... Because, increasingly, the tensions around us tend to be more regional than international.

It is indeed frustrating to realize that, in spite of all these thoughts and conclusions, in spite of the alarms raised by so many scholars and diplomats, the foreign policy priorities of a vast majority of countries have in most cases remained focused on political, economic and military matters. These were the topics that concentrated financial resources and commanded political attention. These were the subjects that were extensively analyzed in books and specialized reports.

I am not suggesting that political, economic or military considerations, among many other objective themes, do not deserve the priorities they command. Of course they do. After all, they reflect the realities around us, the crisis, the challenges, the fears we all share. It is only natural that these priorities should dominate our TV news, our radios and our newspapers – as well as the books we read.

But should they be the only ones? Isn't there another way to also examine foreign relations, other than through the lenses of violence and fear, or economic challenges and competition?

A simple analogy comes to mind, when one considers these questions against the background of foreign relations. It is as if medicine never looked around for the deeper causes of diseases, and only concentrated on the symptoms. The symptoms are the crises, the problems all over us. But what are the true causes of most of them, what are some of their deepest roots?

Few authors and political analysts pause to consider a very simple anthropological truth, namely, that if different peoples 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 ultimately leads to crises and conflicts – could be immensely reduced.

So this is my basic contention here today: the expansion of cultural awareness can play a crucial role in reducing political and economic tensions. If more time, money and efforts were spent in cultural relations, most of the crises which still plague us today would diminish greatly. They would not disappear. But their impact would be reduced. And we would certainly have a better dialogue between opposing factions than the ones we are witnessing today, regardless of their political context.

Call it idealism if you will. But if you bear in mind the opening words of the Charter of UNESCO, you will see what I mean. These words, as you may remember, are: "Since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defenses of peace must be constructed".

Now let's see how we can approach this subject of ours, this "sunny side of foreign relations", in a less abstract way. Let's try to give it some life, and above all some shape.

We live as it has often been said, in an age of vague, or porous, borders. Globalization, seen as a threat by some, as an unavoidable reality by most, is here to stay. Regional integration, a phenomenon taking place, simultaneously, in different parts of the world, will probably pave the way to a predominantly integrated society.

Given these basic premises, distances should be measured, not in geographical terms, but in cultural terms. In other words, in terms of affinities. Or the lack of them. This brings us to the front door of cultural relations. And it is in the wider context of cultural relations that we will address cultural diplomacy. Because cultural diplomacy is nothing more, nothing less, than cultural relations put at the service of foreign policy.

Cultural relations are not an invention of our times. We are not discussing a recent phenomenon, or something created by electronics. Throughout History, the vast majority of greater cultures was formed and shaped 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 19th century, 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, pushed or 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 crisscrosses the world. And the role some Governments play in directing this cultural flow.

Indeed, some Governments know perfectly well how to benefit from this continuous source of wealth – derived from their cultural presence beyond their borders. Others, the vast majority actually, are so burdened by other priorities, that they neglect to emphasize their culture as a major asset, as a major tool of insertion in the 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.

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 over the ages – whether governments liked it or not. Now, cultural diplomacy, as I just mentioned, consists of the use of cultural relations as an instrument of foreign policy.

There is nothing wrong with using culture as a tool of foreign policy – provided, of course, that we do not associate cultural diplomacy to propaganda, or to political and economic indoctrination. Provided, also, that no quick results may be expected in return of programs of cultural diplomacy.

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 kind of subtlety drives our bureaucrats crazy...How can they be asked to provide funds for “invisible” objectives?)

Cultural diplomacy, therefore, is a very long term investment, with no foreseeable dividends. What it does is something less than tangible: it helps to create a positive atmosphere around the nation whose culture it promotes. Many first world countries use this tool as a relevant part of their foreign policy, some of them managing to project their interests in a way that far exceeds their real importance in the international arena.

A generation or two ago, political analysts and diplomats could well afford to disregard the importance of cultural diplomacy. But this is no longer the case. In 1945, when the UN was created, there were roughly 50 States in existence. In 1965, around the time I joined the Brazilian Foreign Ministry, 120. Last time I counted, there were more than two hundred of them. Each year, millions of people are added to the world population (the vast majority of which from the developing world).

Against this background, we wake up each morning to face an amazing convergence of revolutions in practically all fields of human knowledge – which the internet helps spread around the world. Progress in all fields, be them scientific, technical or economic, has never been more astounding than today.

Now, if we combine the multiplication of new States, most emerging from the debris of colonization or from the former Soviet Union, with the technological revolution which reduces North/South & East/West gaps, we can easily understand the scale of the changes we find ourselves in, as well as the speed with which international relations keep expanding, and new strategic alliances keep taking shape.

On the whole, however, most of us share a basic feeling: that of belonging to the same boat. And this perception is further accentuated by a common vulnerability to major international problems, which, today, are no longer perceived as national issues, such as ecological threats, transmission of diseases of epidemic proportions, transnational crime, stock-market crashes, and so on.

Thirty years ago if the stock-market in Korea crashed, most Brazilians would not even blink. Not anymore, as evidenced by this recent economic Tsunami we now find ourselves in. Thirty years ago, if parts of the Amazon rain-forest burned, Australians or Thais (or anyone for that matter) would not really care. Now they – and the rest of the world – watch anxiously each TV report concerning new ecologic disasters in every part of the world affected by global warming and pollution. Depending on which part of the world you live in, the same can be said of transnational crime, illegal immigration flows, and a number of other challenges we face everyday.

One of the major consequences of this state of affairs – which seems to be eliminating frontiers and creating others, thus re-shaping the whole world around us – is the growing capacity of re-organization demonstrated by modern societies, a capacity which nowadays relies heavily on economic interchange – and which would be greatly enriched if it also relied on cultural interchange.

Why? Because this process is characterized, as I said, by speed – which, in turn, translates into international competition. In the near future, the well-being – and even the survival – of some nations may depend on how well they perform internationally. The less known a country, the lesser its chances of competing, the lesser its possibilities of having its views heard or respected. And just how do you make your presence felt outside your own borders?

You could rely on your military might, if you can afford the tanks and the bombs. Or on trade, if you excel in that particular domain. Or on a political agenda, on technical cooperation, and many other backbones of bilateral relations. But all of them could greatly benefit if the country's cultural background happens to be better known beyond its borders.

Why? I ask again. Because no other instrument available to diplomats can be perceived as a part of the common heritage of mankind. 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 instantly accepted as belonging to all – and not only to that specific country.

In this regard, Beethoven is not a German composer only, nor Picasso is just a Spanish painter. Both happen to be among our favorite composers or painters. They do not belong to any given country. The pyramids do not fascinate us because they happen to be located in Egypt, nor does the Acropolis, Angkor Vat or Machu Picchu inspire us just because they are part of Greece, Cambodia or Peru. They inspire us like poetry or music move us -- because they reflect human genius. They reflect Man at its best.

It is this feeling of belonging, of being part of a higher sphere of human achievements, that makes culture so appealing to all. Culture does not intimidate (as a military presence intimidates), nor does it oppress (as economic pressure often does), nor does it lead to competition, as so many of our other activities do. On the contrary: culture seduces, it amuses, it gets to us emotionally, makes us think – and it makes us feel as part of a whole.

In a nutshell, and to conclude, may I be allowed to oversimplify these issues. One could say that 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 technology; and so on and so forth.

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

Developing countries should invest in this domain, to project 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 this.

And what about the key players in the international scene? It is true that some of them, as I mentioned, invest in culture as a part of their foreign policy objectives. But if they could be convinced to go a step further, and spend on culture (including their supposed enemy's culture) just a minor fraction of what they spend on armaments and weapons of mass destruction, our planet, as a whole, would be in a far better shape than it is today.

Yes, it is a long term proposition. And one that does not present very visible returns -- at first sight. In the long run, however, this relevant alternative could make a difference. Had we embarked on this road a generation ago, as Senator Fulbright suggested, and as so many other intellectuals from different nations suggested, we might have found ourselves in a very different world today.

Thank you very much.

ETR/19.12.08

OUTROS PONTOS PARA DEBATE ORAL

1) Descrever como o DC trabalha:

- a) CEBs + Institutos (língua e cultura)
- b) Divulgação Cultural : prioridades regionais ou políticas;
contância;
parcerias c/ iniciativa privada;
- c) Fortes elos com UNESCO : Convenção s/ Diversidade Cultural (novembro 2005)
- d) Forte parceria e entrosamente com o MinC: legitimidade

2) O Ano do Brasil na França (2005, de março a dezembro).
Descrição. A origem francesa. (O papel da França como pioneira em matéria de diplomacia cultural. Napoleão, Liceus, etc.) Francofonia. As Saisons. Como funcionavam. A nossa. Pela primeira vez foi possível medir os retornos de investimentos em áreas culturais: incremento do turismo; incremento de investimentos; incremento de aulas de português e estudos sobre o Brasil nas Universidades francesas. Sucesso foi tal que, em 2009, deverá, pela primeira vez haver reciprocidade: o Ano da França no Brasil.

3) Dois exemplos de atividades culturais que provocaram “breakthroughs”: Henry Moore na Venezuela (na seqüência da Guerra das Malvinas) + US Philharmonic Orchestra playing in North Korea.