

CULTURAL DIPLOMACY - THE FUTURE

Dr. Robert T. Taylor

Representative
The British Council
Greece

It is a unique chance to stand back and look at the events of our century and to think ahead to the next. Much has been written regarding particular problems which alter our environment or aspects of the framework of our society which affect us in our daily lives. These are all factors which depend mainly on the specific policies and practices of individual governments. However, above and beyond these individual policies are global attitudes and it is here that diplomacy, in general, plays its part. Diplomatic relations between governments do not normally impinge directly on the lives of the majority of people, although everyone can be disastrously affected when they go wrong. Governments, whether elected or not, carry out a political will which is determined mainly by present necessities and governed by past events. Governments are normally preoccupied with relatively short-term policies to meet immediate crises and not with the long-term future.

We have passed through the industrial revolution and now live in the age of technical innovation. Ours is hardly a visionary age. The technological wonders that surround and excite us seem more to compound rather than resolve fundamental problems. Over the last generation one unsensational progression has been achieved that has brought about a degree of international convergence of thought. The propagation of the written word, with information freely passing across frontiers and above all, cultural exchanges between peoples are caused by the spread of education. This is the area of cultural diplomacy between countries, and the time is opportune to capitalise on the potential it yields for world stability, peace and prosperity. I do not see cultural diplomacy as simply one element in normal diplomatic relations - it is something which can transcend diplomacy itself. It is often said that the golden age of diplomacy has passed. This may be, but beyond diplomacy is cultural diplomacy and for me this particular form of cultural relation is proving itself today and holds the promise for the future.

It is accepted in most countries today that cultural relations are an essential third dimension in relations between states: "third" because they accompany politics and trade. It was Willy Brandt in 1966 who first gave currency to the term "the third pillar of foreign policy." Senator Fulbright, after whom one of the most imaginative exchange schemes is named, wrote in 1964: "Foreign policy cannot be based on military posture and diplomatic activities alone in today's world. 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." The French, who pioneered cultural relations, consider the representation of their culture abroad to be virtually a sacred mission and spend half their budget for foreign relations on it. But whereas the French Government has traditionally identified this work closely with French interests and foreign policy, the general tendency in other democracies since 1945, has been to distance it from government direction and control. The idea of people communicating with each other across national boundaries has been a constant theme throughout the world over the last 40 years and is one of the fundamental beliefs of the European Community.

At its most effective, the purpose of cultural diplomacy is to achieve understanding and co-operation between national societies for their mutual benefit. Cultural relations proceed ideally by the accumulation of experiences between two countries through open professional exchanges rather than by selective self-projection: the latter being better described as propaganda. Cultural relations portrays an honest picture of each country rather than a beautified one. It does not conceal national problems but neither does it make a show of them. It neither pretends the warts do not exist nor does it parade them to the repugnance of others. Equally though, let us not be naive. Governments, even in open democratic countries, look for a return on the investment of funds in cultural relations in terms of national advantage. Whereas the real return is for the people of the country through long-term relationships with other peoples which produce and propagate understanding and encourage co-operation. It is because these relationships can flourish best, if not subject to politics, that cultural diplomacy work is best done by organisations that enjoy some degree of independence from the state machinery. Such organisations, as in Britain, are sometimes constitutionally independent. Elsewhere they are formally responsible to a ministry, usually the Foreign Ministry, but encouraged by the government and the ambassador overseas to exercise a considerable measure of autonomy and independence. In France and Germany, e.g., there is a mixture of the two. Cultural diplomacy is spread over a range of institutions and ministries, but with the Foreign Ministry co-ordinating the overall programme and policy. Indeed, today, the concept of the "cultural attache" slavishly scoring points for his political master, is the very antithesis of right-minded cultural diplomacy and is probably out-of-date, even in the embassies of the most totalitarian of states.

But what of culture itself, the undefined concept which is the very heart of the matter? The component parts comprise the arts, libraries and information services, literature, language teaching, science and technology, social structure, the exchange of persons, links between communities and institutions, and educational aid and training in the developing world. T.S. Elliott settled for the simple definition of culture as "that which makes life worth living." The word "culture" itself certainly varies in the depth of its meaning. In German, for instance, "culture" is a more fundamental word than it is in English. In England the idea of culture has "never moved the man on the Clapham Common

bus" as the ordinary citizen has been styled; and yet he himself incorporates a very distinctive culture in the sense of a set of values, attitudes and a view of the world.

There is the need for a measure of independence from government policy for cultural relations, but the work is bound to depend, to a large extent, on the public purse. However much money may be raised from cultural activities themselves, or from collaborators and sponsors, it can do no more than make up a proportion of the total cost. The proportion will vary according to each country's policy and management and it will be determined by the attractiveness of what is on offer - artistically, scientifically, linguistically or educationally - but it can never be more than a proportion.

Most forms of cultural activity are subsidised and this is the accepted style of our age. Governments are called upon to make grants and must justify these to the tax-payers. If governments are persuaded to go on funding cultural relations in a time of recession, a convincing rationale is needed concerning the good done by cultural relations not just to the participants and beneficiaries, but to the national interests at large.

Fortunately for us today, Clausewitz's pronouncement of 1827 that "war is the continuation of politics by other means" is no longer true. However, although there is a consensus about the need to avoid war, there is little in the way of a concerted policy to promote peace in the world. However fervently ordinary citizens desire peace they find little scope for action on its behalf. When such action is attempted it is all too easily channelled into political campaigns. This is one area where cultural diplomacy can and does play a part. Culture is not a quick "wonder cure" for trouble spots, but as part of the pattern of relationships between states it creates an atmosphere that is favourable to peace. The emphasis on "that which makes life worth living", generates an atmosphere which is against destruction. This is not a matter of woolly idealism but of practical common sense, of sound investment. In 1944, when the British Government committed itself to continued expenditure on the work of the British Council - its agent for cultural relations overseas - it said: "The most general and remote of these aims is a peace of understanding between the peoples of the world." The Federal Republic of Germany gives particular prominence to peace in its cultural relations. In 1978 the Foreign Office there said: "Our foreign cultural policy is essentially international co-operation in the cultural sector. It is part of our foreign policy, a policy designed to promote the safe-guarding of world peace."

The contribution that cultural relations make to peace is a cumulative one and is achieved through promoting understanding. Activities arranged by cultural agencies create a favourable impression on foreigners in leading positions, either directly, as with high culture, or indirectly through the reputation built up through professional exchanges and through the exchange of information. Sir Anthony Parsons, former Foreign Policy Advisor to Mrs. Thatcher, expressed it well when he said, "Nations, like people, do not act solely in accordance with an objective evaluation of their best interests. Decision-making at all levels is more often informed by emotional and psychological factors. It is in this area, often intangible and difficult to quantify in terms of balancing the books, that cultural relations play a leading part. It really is blatantly obvious. If you are thoroughly familiar with someone else's language and literature, if you know and love their country, its arts and its people; you feel instinctively disposed - all other things being equal or nearly equal - to support them actively when you consider them to be right, and to avoid too severe a criticism when you regard them as being in the wrong. These simple truths certainly work when we are concerned with individuals; why not then so far as the rest of the world?" Most people would share this belief, but perhaps it is because they are "simple truths" that they are so difficult to prove. The exchange of persons is probably the most enduring means of increasing understanding and usually takes up the largest part of the resources of cultural agencies. Mostly it is directed at key persons in priority areas. The careful identification of target groups is essential, as are tact and restraint. International goodwill and understanding are rarely achieved by direct assault. They are more usually the by-products of activities in which men and women work together for reasons that seem to be good and sufficient in themselves.

I have looked briefly at the general arguments for funding cultural relations. For each country a rationale is needed to justify government expenditure. Let me finish by looking at the changes in rationale which have taken place in Britain during this century. Every country has its own individual approach and, as I commented earlier, France is the one with the most intense and comprehensive attitude to Cultural Relations -- it is one which, in parts, I envy. The French idea of bearing a cultural mission to the world is of long standing, it is a messianic approach - how different from Britain! Any notion that Britain had a sacred or moral duty to spread its culture (as distinct from its order justice or trade) found little favour during the imperial days. Culture was not a concept that attracted enthusiasm within Britain: we did not, like France, possess the intellectual tradition of seeing literature and language, the arts as an expression of nationhood that should be transmitted to others. One British official in 1919 concisely put it: "To promote one's country in times of peace is not cricket." A British Foreign Office memorandum of the time commented: "Of the three main elements which make up British influence - political, economic and culture - the first two have long been recognised as fundamental. The third, cultural influence, while vaguely creditable, is of little practical use, and so far above worldly considerations that it ought never to be degraded to political ends."

Compare this with Talleyrand's famous prescription to French Ambassadors leaving Paris to take up their posts: "Make them love France." The difference was apparent in our two colonial policies. While France diffused her language through a series of schools with seconded teachers, and bestowed recognisably French attitudes of thought with it, Britain built upon the tradition and practices of the colonial country and left education to the mission schools. We preferred simply not to bother about cultures as long as the country functioned in our favour.

In the 1930's, when the British Government established the British Council to counter propaganda from fascist countries, the Treasury wrote, "There is some danger that the aim of the British Council may imperceptibly be transformed into a general desire to spread British culture

throughout the world and it would be impossible to defend such expenditure in Parliament." One might think that today these attitudes have changed but it is sad to report, as recently as 1977, when the Government commissioned a review of cultural and information agencies, the Berrill report said, "Culture should be given a low priority in developing countries because it is of doubtful value to their needs and resources spent on other activities would normally bring greater benefit to them." How little the Berrill report knew of the world. In fact, the search for a cultural identity which leads to artistic exchange, is usually one of the highest priorities for developing nations. Fortunately, the Berrill recommendations were never accepted. The concept of cultural relations in Britain now is not only acceptable, it is even respectable. It is no longer the belief of a few idealists, but a firm conviction of the Government that cultural relations have a key role to play. Only last year, Parliament made a detailed review of cultural diplomacy and strongly recommended that more funds should be devoted to this activity - a far cry from the views of earlier governments! The report confirmed that the role of cultural relations is not to promote trade or diplomacy, but to enrich the human spirit, enhance international understanding, and expand the horizons of men and women throughout the world.

Cultural relations are our best hope of transmuting traditional prejudices into attitudes of understanding and co-operation. Culture has the advantage of being a possession which all people can share. Today we can speak more meaningfully than ever before of a "world culture". Accessible by virtue of its shared humanity, it can be transmitted freely and without censorship in its diversity beyond political frontiers by modern methods of diffusion. There is, of course, no panacea for the world's ills, but cultural diplomacy does offer potential for their reduction and manageability. If I may return to my starting point of diplomacy and politics, I shall define cultural diplomacy as the best means yet devised by civilisation for preventing international affairs from being governed by politics alone. For me, cultural diplomacy is one of the key foundations for the 21st Century; a foundation on which we can build mutual trust and understanding.

Dr. **Robert T. Taylor** is the British Council representative in Greece. He holds a B.A., M.A. and D.Phil. from Oxford University. He has been a research associate and Fulbright Scholar at the University of Michigan, and ICI Research Fellow at the University of Liverpool. He has travelled to India, Spain and Mexico as the British Council representative, has contributed to Chambers Encyclopaedia and has published many papers in scientific journals.