Education inside cultural diplomacy: challenges and discussions

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This paper examines various theoretical conceptions of forms, factors and objectives in the realm of the external cultural actions considered from the State prospective.

1. Culture and education in international relations

The Relationships and interactions between different countries and nations in the international arena have undergone profound change over the past century. Previously, knowledge of societies other than the own one was very limited. The underdeveloped transport, frontiers and the difficulties of transmitting ideas and news did not allow a more intensive exchange. At the state level a minority of diplomatic corps, agents of the *classical diplomacy*, made those interactions. On the other hand, missionaries, businessmen, merchants, soldiers, geographers, explorers or research groups from academia represented the private sphere (Delgado, 1994: 258). In the twentieth century the situation has changed radically in the framework of the so-called *communication revolution* onwards (Mansell, 2002). In fact the emergence of public opinion, with its possibilities of influencing the leaders' decisions, has transformed not only domestic politics, but also the relationships with other nations. Hence, along with traditional elements of interaction between states, geopolitical and economics interests, culture and education became a new factor in international relations. In fact something unique to the first half of the XX century was the expansion of culture to a wider group of the population

(Dollot, 1964: 5) and the diversification and multiplication of cultural and educational activities.

Educational activities, exchange programs, scientific technology and *know-how* transfers, art exhibitions, music tours or sport events have definitively crossed national boundaries in the last three or four decades. This does not mean, at all, that they were inexistent before. What is new from the second half of XX century onwards is its scope and growth. That tendency led some scholars to describe, "culture", including all the afore mentioned activities, as the fourth dimension of international relations, together with the previously accepted political, economic and military factors. (Coombs, 1964; Mitchell, 1986; Harvey, 1991; Xintian, 2004; Wallerstein, 2007; Lebow, 2008).

It is important to clarify the differences between: cultural action and foreign cultural policy. The first is an operation carried out by very different actors: public or semi-public agencies, associations, religious communities, geographical societies, leagues, universities, or foundations, which try to implement their respective agendas abroad. The second, however, has usually a narrower scope and refers only to the specific actions planned, coordinated or organized by a government, with the explicit and precise goal to serve the objectives of the state (Niño, 2009: 32-33).

In reality the line that separates cultural action and foreign cultural policy tends to be blur, especially under situation of crisis or wars, or in the cases where it tends to be considered as propaganda. Either cultural and education action or foreign cultural policy requires a long time approach in order to produce results. Therefore, it is imperative that they run constantly, following the principle of continuity: "a stop-go approach undermines efficacy" (Mitchell, 1986: 227). It is important to emphasize that the mental structures and collective images and representations evolve slowly (Chartier, 1992). Accordingly, cultural interactions between two societies need an extended period of time to occur. As a consequence, this policy is usually undervalued, if not rejected, by politicians, captives as they are to temporary mandates. Consequently, this task should be understood as a work of State, able to overcome partisan political fighting to maintain some continuity of action. The latter question is connected with the budget constraint. Despite the difficulty of implementing the education and cultural dimension abroad, it is usually positive for the country's interest to invest in this field. Cultural isolation or insularism, even in the most totalitarian and closes political regimes, it is impossible today, due to the media interconnectivity of the present *global village*.

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On the other hand, the transmission of propaganda is generally carried out in a particular period of time, with a high intensity level. The main objective is to obtain an immediate benefit. It is not oriented to comprehend and understand the interlocutor but to convince him of the own views. In international cultural relations, by contrast, national actors project their culture while seeking to receive the cultural influence of the observer. The aim is to reach a mutually beneficial way round, unlike the one-way road of propaganda.

Cultural relations between different peoples or societies are often asymmetrical. In some cases, governments strive to set quotas or barrier against the "torrent" of foreign cultural products, in the belief that their respective cultures and identities would perish, sank in exotic or indigenous influences, polluted by an alleged external cultural contamination. This has generated mistrust and suspicions, especially among developing countries. Yet, balancing that flow usually proves to be a challenging, often impossible task.

However the story is much more complex than a simplistic invasion of Western models over supposed passive citizens in other part of the world. Indeed and along the second half of the XX century, the latter have adapted, and transformed that external cultural stream according to their local preferences or contexts; likewise, sometimes have just rejected it (Golding and Harris, 1997; Pells, 1997; Stephan, 2006; Markovits, 2007). Thus, the notion of 'cultural imperialism' have been rethought and updated, emerging other concepts as 'the mix globalized culture', being the outcome of merging diverse cultural traditions and influences (Gienow-Hecht, 2000: 487-490) Furthermore, it is worthy to note that the cultural influence exerted by a given country abroad is not easy to handle; and even more: sometimes trigger a 'boomerang effect' Wagnleitner, 1994: xvi). For instance, Muslim reactions against what was perceived as an intolerable Americanization of their lives would fit in that scheme. A phenomenon –full of contradictions and nuances– which have been described as *Jihad versus McWorld* (Barber, 1995).

2. Forms of cultural action

In the current information society we live now, with Internet and social media reshaping the classic concept of power and geographical borders and frontiers, cultural isolation proves generally to be a very complicated,

almost impossible mission. Neither the most totalitarian and repressive regimes could implement a completely closed-doors strategy, at least not in a long period time, to preserve its academic, educational and cultural universe against external influences. Since every country is therefore prompted to deploy its own cultural action abroad, and receive more or less pleased other nations' ones, let see the different ways that this actions can takes.

First, unilateral foreign cultural actions, understood as that which takes place from one country to another without the collaboration of the second. Generally, absent of large disputes or confrontations between the two countries, that first type of cultural action is accepted as normal. Facilities provided for its dissemination will depend, of course, on the degree of understanding that exists between the parts involved. Examples of this typology are the activities executed by a given government to offer language and culture courses to its citizens and their children living temporarily overseas (Ma and Cartier, 2003; Delgado 2007). Treatment of this floating population or diaspora varies from generous social assistance to simple and limited help or even hostility, contingent to political affinity[1].

Second, bilateral foreign cultural actions, assumed as a two-way road, back and forth, in which both countries collaborate and interact to control, encourage or redirect their respective cultural activities in the host country. The proliferation of cultural agents, such as NGO's or foundations, has curtailed the previous government hegemony in this realm. Thus, it is understood that government must play a moderating role as supervisor of private initiatives.

Third and finally, multilateral foreign cultural actions, associated with the so-called "globalization of culture and education" promoted by UNESCO (Makinda, 1986; Wells, 1987; Courrier, 2005) Educational, artistic, technological or scientific exchange would be understood not as an exclusive privilege of developed countries but as a useful mechanism for the development of poorer countries. Unfortunately and it is the case in other fields of the international relations, this kind of joint multilateral initiatives is usually obstructed by nationalistic view. The current debate about the necessary renewal of the UN does little to increase confidence in the measures of its subordinate organizations, such as UNESCO.

The adoption by a country of one of these three modes of interaction with the outside world, or all of them, depend on certain needs or historical junctures. However, models can be established in response to how

countries have typically handled its external cultural activities. Thus, it is possible differentiate in between those with a centralized bureaucratic apparatus (France for instance) from those federalist (United States as an example) in which lower organizational institutions and private initiatives play an important role. This categorization, notwithstanding, should be regarded with caution because reality rarely matches fully with theoretical models. Influenced by the *containment policy* against communism, US government, for example, embraced a more intrusive policy than before with regard to private plans for projecting American culture and education abroad.

3. Factors determining external cultural action

First, it is important to emphasize that the way countries organize their legal frameworks in this regard is often very different. Attempts to homogenize them undertaken by UNESCO have not always achieved the expected results. In the cultural field as in many others, governments are often reluctant to converge to international criteria, considering that it would mean a loss of their sovereignty. Hence, cultural and educational interactions may be limited or hindered by national legislations. Think for instance of the slowness and pitfalls confronted by the *Bologna Process*, proposed to guarantee compatibility in the standards and quality of higher education among European countries (Amaral, 2009; Schaller, 2007).

More recently, another example that comes to mind is the one related to the copyrights and Internet access. On December 2012 and coordinated by United Nations, there was a gathering in Dubai to deal with these questions. One of the most heated debates ran over European-backed suggestions to change the pay structure of the Web to force content providers, such as Google Inc., Facebook Inc. and others to kick in an extra fee to reach users across borders. Even more controversial was the fact that those measures could be used by authoritarian regimes as Iran or China to justify their crackdowns on bloggers and other Web restrictions[2]. In other words, Internet has enormously bolstered the external cultural action possibilities of private and public actors in the international arena. However, governments, especially those more reluctant to free and open societies, strive to "stem the wave". Frictions among citizens' desire to accesses freely to information and authorities' attempt to control it are bound to continue.

Another factor determining, even more significantly, the external cultural actions is the amount of funds assigned for this policy area. We noted earlier that the cultural isolation is impossible today, that countries are often compelled to interact with the outside and that the territorial scope must be as broad as possible. However, budgets are limited and required provisions are generally unaffordable entirely by the competent bodies. Hence, selecting priority areas and obtaining private support prove to be essential. In any case, the maintenance of an established infrastructure use to be less expensive than restoring them after a period of abandon. Therefore, the principle of continuity must prevail in this realm. Obtaining results in this field requires time. The problem lies in the fact that politicians tend to think in the short term, not in the medium or long term; or paraphrasing Winston Churchill: only statesmen think in the next generation instead of the next elections.

As for the staff in charge of this type of activity, it is crucial to screen them rigorously, according to the specific needs. This will determine to a large extent the chances of success. When economic constraints force to address issues for which a given person is not really prepared the result may be contrary to expectation or simply ruin the advances previously obtained. A good image abroad requires a long and sustained effort, and a minor might be difficult to erase.

Apart from the abovementioned elements, conflicts to determine the sphere of influence and action on the projection of culture abroad usually emerge inside the administrative apparatus of the different states, most of the times among the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Culture and Education. Unless ad hoc institutions are created to coordinate efforts, clashes are common, generating noting but the slowdown and obstruction of the external activities overseas (Delgado, 1992; Rodríguez Jiménez, 2012)

4. Objectives of cultural action abroad

The purposes or potential benefits that the development of an external cultural action can yield are wide-ranging. Naturally, every member of the international community set its own agenda. Thus, the objectives of either country may be different and even opposing. In general, the most widespread of all is to encourage domestic trade abroad. The cultural action abroad, as a "peaceful penetration", can create the basis for a fluid

economic exchange. "Our culture often precedes our exports" (Pendergast, 1973: 685). A good cultural image beyond national borders often facilitates economic transactions, while prejudices and mutual distrust hamper them. This is the less altruistic potential of the cultural proselytism. Perhaps, that is why it is the most accepted by governments.

On the other hand, and with a wider scope, the cultural factor has been deployed as an element to ease continuity in the interactions between countries. From this perspective, it would add stability and constancy in the sometimes-erratic international relations. To put it simply, the cultural factor would work as sort of "mattress" that muffled possible clashes and frictions on other planes of reality as the economic or political ones. The value of this element is shown in the fact that, normally, cultural relations are the first to be established between two countries and the latest in being cut when a conflict arise. Hence, vitality or decline of cultural exchange between two countries can be a good barometer to measure the atmosphere of understanding and cooperation between them.

Finally, foreign cultural activities are also understood as a mechanism by which developed countries can help the progress of developing countries. Exchanges of technological or scientific *know how* can help to bolster economy in the receipting nation. In this regard, it is necessary to explain that usually the developing countries are essentially interested in science and scientific development of the developed country, while the latter tend to look mainly to the artistic or anthropological realms of the first. (Niño, 2005: 28).

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Endnotes

1. Unfriendliness that is sometimes channeled for political goals by another government, see Thurston, 1999.
2. Yang, 2011; Roach, Stephen: "China's Connectivity Revolution" 26/01/2012; Singer, Peter: "The Unknown Promise of Internet Freedom" 31/03/2010; Zittrain, Jonathan: "Censor and Sensibility" 25/09/2006; Lynch, Daniel "China's Great Internet Firewall" 10/12/2002. All these texts are accessible at http://www.project-syndicate.org/search?query=Internet+oversight.