2014

Leading by example

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Scholar Commons Citation

Reiter, Bernd, "Leading by example" (2014). Government and International Affairs Faculty Publications. Paper 110.
http://scholarcommons.usf.edu/gia_facpub/110

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Culture is more than a book or a play. Culture opens doors and builds bridges to the peoples of the world. In Africa, America, the Arab world and Asia, centuries-old trading and communications routes are being redrawn. Culture could present Europe with the opportunity to forge a ‘New Deal’ with the world. The situation in Europe’s neighbouring regions, North Africa and the Middle East, requires the old continent to draw up a common strategy. In Africa, relations need to be started afresh in order to build greater trust.

The dialogue with Latin America has to encompass climate change, soil erosion, water pollution and over-fishing. Globalisation has created a new context for democracy, and it is not just in Asia that it needs to be debated afresh. What initiatives are needed in the area of external cultural policy – and what does the world expect of them? How is Europe perceived by the rest of the world and how can European culture play a role in external relations? And finally, how can EUNIC – the European network of national institutes for culture – make a truly effective contribution?
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Escaping the mid-life crisis

The gaze of the Other shapes my body... creates it as it is, sees it as I will never see it.” For leading French existentialist Jean-Paul Sartre, the Self only becomes aware of its reality through the gaze of the Other. In this way, the Self gains awareness and discovers its place in the world. But we do not have to be existentialists to take a certain pleasure in holding up the mirror to ourselves and others. Indeed, for Sartre, the Other took a negative role by robbing the Self of its freedom to determine its own future.

In international cultural relations, systematic listening takes on essential – not to say existential – importance. Without listening, it is impossible to conduct any kind of fruitful dialogue. So it is somewhat surprising that this sixth edition of the Culture Report is the first to investigate how Europe is perceived from beyond its borders. More specifically, this edition looks at expectations of Europe’s culture in its external relations. Opinions have been sought from commentators in Africa, Asia and Latin America in an attempt to illustrate the challenges that Europe faces in our fast-changing, multipolar world. 20 of the 30 contributors live outside Europe.

Kenyan journalist Peter Kimani is amazed that Africa still has to “grapple with the traumatic experiences of slavery and colonialism that still shape European perceptions of its continent. If we are to overcome Europe’s ignorance of Africa, he believes there is a need for cultural immersion that goes beyond that of European diarists and travel journalists. He rails against narrow-minded “Out of Africa rhetoric” and warns that the EU will have to change its strategy towards Africa now that Africans are learning how to survive without Europe. Farai Mpfumwa, director of a development fund in Zimbabwe, proposes a “New Deal” between Africa and Europe on the basis of a partnership of equals. It must take into account the new sense of self-confidence that has developed in Africa’s 54 countries with their 1.5 billion people, enormous resources and rates of economic growth that for others remain little more than a pipe dream.

Carlos Ornelas, a professor of education and communications in Mexico City, wonders why his compatriots still know more about Greek mythology than about the Aztecs and Maya. Lashlal Dowbor, a political scientist based in São Paolo, gently points out that the question of Brazil’s expectations of Europe is actually missing the point. “We are all big boys now.” The time has long gone when Latin America was still trying to find ways of joining the modern world. Now it is a case of addressing common global challenges that individual countries can no longer tackle alone: financial chaos, climate change and growing social inequality.

Yang Lian, a Chinese poet who lives in exile in Berlin, ponders the extent to which globalisation has shaken the old world order and how it can be that a bewildered Europe suddenly finds itself stricken by poverty. The old equation “Capitalism equals democracy equals prosperity” certainly no longer applies. The tsunami of Chinese economic success has led to new reflections on democracy. And what are the consequences for Europe? With regard to the upheavals in the Arab world, political scientist Claus Leggewie claims that the EU has failed to find an appropriate reaction. It either responded to the Arab Spring with great reserve or with the usual reflexes of former world powers attempting to retain their old colonial spheres of influence. The region has asked more of Europe than it has so far been prepared to give. It will only be possible to establish a project for peace and development that can spread beyond the core of Europe if the South is also brought into the conversation about the future. Such a project must include important issues such as energy supply, while also tackling the contradiction between repressive policies on refugees and rational policies on migration.

Isabelle Schwarz of the European Cultural Foundation calls for a strategic European foreign policy that would ideally react to the new power centres of our multipolar world by finally exploiting the true potential of culture. “If Europe wants to remain relevant in the world rather than turning the notion of a ‘dwarfing Europe’ into cruel reality, it needs to use its key assets much more strategically and effectively.” Most of our authors agree that it is not only Europe’s cultural heritage, but also the whole gamut of the creative industries, from architecture and fashion to film, fine arts and literature, that exerts a strong attraction around the world. At a time when emerging nations are experiencing rates of economic growth that can only be dreamt of in Europe, culture can be a real source of power for the old continent. Culture can make a major contribution to meeting huge social challenges such as migration and integration and also play its part in mitigating conflicts. With over 2,000 branches in some 150 countries, EUNIC has certainly not yet made the most of its potential. EUNIC and the European Union as a whole are facing the challenge of how to develop a lasting future strategy for the community at large out of their successful work in cities and centres around the world. However, to quote French writer Frédéric Martel in his allegory on the new geopolitics of the internet and the multipolarisation that exists there and in real life: The internet is neither good nor bad, it is what we make of it. Instead of sticking its head in the sand, Europe needs to act, for example by setting new agendas. Or, in the words of Claus Leggewie: “It is time for Europe to overcome the midlife crisis that has beset it since the euro crisis. This is the sixth edition of the Culture Report, and the third time that it has been published as the EUNIC Yearbook. This volume brings together the outcomes of a conference held in Brussels that was jointly organised by EUNIC and the ifa Research Programme on Culture and Foreign Policy. I would like to thank everyone involved, and in particular the authors and translators, for their contributions to this project. Special thanks also go to the European Cultural Foundation in Amsterdam for making it possible to produce an English version and to the Steidl-Verlag in Göttingen for publishing this edition.

Sebastian Körber is Deputy Secretary-General and Head of the Media Department at the Institute for Foreign Cultural Relations. 
Revolutions – which some people called revolutionary nationalism – is clear to see in Mexico’s officially-promoted culture, but is particularly weak within popular culture. As in Europe, the US tends to dominate in this area and it is spreading rapidly with the advent of modern information and communications technology. US influence on the education sector is also growing steadily, especially in the university sector, even though many Mexicans would actually prefer to study in Europe, particularly in Spain.

I foresee many challenges facing education and the development of a cosmopolitan culture in Europe, because these tend to be of a predominantly national nature. It will fall to the more liberal-minded sectors of society to support these particular types of culture. But they will not be able to achieve this alone and this is where EUNIC can bring its intellectual resources and experience to the table. Europe can make a significant contribution to building trust between the cultural communities on both sides of the Atlantic through cooperation and exchange. With the creation of EUNIC, it is now time to start thinking about some more far-reaching initiatives. Should there be investment in a more ambitious form of cultural diplomacy at EU level, for example, rather than focusing efforts at individual nation state level? Exchange programmes like ALFA and EURIAS or projects such as the Comenius or Erasmus Mundus programmes could be strengthened and expanded.

European culture continues to dominate in the West, even if US American culture is clearly dominates popular culture. People’s cultural awareness has very deep roots that go far beyond what can be seen on TV, the cinema, or disseminated by modern technology. The search for these roots and their connection with universal cultural values could be the starting point for a new, more substantial cosmopolitan culture – one that will have a much greater reach than simple multiculturalism and that will encompass not just individual peoples but mankind as a whole.

Perhaps the most important thing that Europe can do is to work together with Latin America’s cultural institutes to help sow the seeds for such long-term development. Peaceful coexistence is the objective and cultural exchange the means by which peace can be achieved and democracy can be spread throughout the world. This, at least, is my expectation.

Carlos Ornelas is Professor of Education and Communications at the Metropolitan Autonomous University in Mexico City.

Leading by example The oft-cited ‘democratic deficit’ of the EU has its roots in the non-existence of a European public that is able to discuss European politics and thus not only legitimise European politics and policies, but also European politicians. This is why democrats all over the world, that is to say, people who believe in the power of collective decision-making and the importance of dialogue and deliberation, think of the EU as an unfinished project – but also as a promise. By Bernd Reiter
Sovereignty is an illusion

I would venture to say that it is impossible for foreign policy to avoid pursuing this primary aim and that the only difference between countries is their ability (or ‘capability’), to use the jargon of political science to actually act on their foreign policy objectives. Most countries cannot do this because they lack the power to pursue those goals that best advance their own interests. Their sovereignty is an illusion (see: Stephen Krasner, 1999: Sovereignty: Organized Hypocrisy. Princeton: Princeton University Press). So the first lesson that can be drawn from this short exercise is that advocating a foreign policy – cultural or otherwise – that aims to benefit others is not only impossible but also naïve. Any elected French official who focuses more on the wellbeing of the Germans, Americans or Brazilians than that of the French will surely face the trap of the ‘culture industry’, as has been well described by German social philosophers Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno. It turns out that culture is similar to religion in that it does not always fare well when promoted by states. As a foreigner with an emotional attachment to the EU, I believe most of the world expects the EU to succeed in overcoming national divisions and by doing so set an example for the world, not only showing that such a thing is possible, but also how precisely it can be achieved. This is particularly the case for most Latin American countries, whose dreams of unity stretch back to the 1820s and liberators such as Simon Bolivar, along with influential leaders and intellectuals such as the Cuban independence fighter Jose Marti and Mexican intellectual Jose Vasconcelos. They all spoke enthusiastically of a Latin American soul that unites all of its people.

What, then, is the role of culture in foreign relations? What complicates a coherent answer is the problem of the concept of ‘culture’. What is it? Whose culture? Which cultures should we be promoting? Tellingly, the United States does not have a department of culture. Instead, different cities have departments or bureaus that seek to promote those cultural expressions that sell well, attract tourists and increase their revenues. In America, the U.S. Treasury uses a Latin American proverb in its marketing materials. ‘What you can do for yourself, do not leave to the Government.’ As a smart economy, the US is able to see the value of cultural expressions. In Latin America, many countries lack the capacity to promote their culture and are thus dependent on the US.

The United States does not have a department of culture. Instead, different cities have departments or bureaus that seek to promote those cultural expressions that sell well, attract tourists and increase their revenues.”

For a political scientist like myself, the lessons we can learn from the EU are intriguing, and I venture to say that the expectations we who reside outside of the EU should have are of considerable importance. EU internal cultural policies offer lessons to our divided world.

Beyond national foreign cultural policy

At the core of this lesson is the insight that national foreign policy objectives might be more successfully achieved through cooperation. This is particularly true in the context of small and medium-sized countries that do not have the capacity (or capability) to conduct their foreign policy independently and, if necessary, against the will of other countries or even a majority of countries. The only country that is still able to do so is the United States, and we should not be surprised if we witness the USA acting in their own interests – even if this means acting against the interest of other countries. Independence, after all, means not having to ask others for permission or support.

The EU, on the other hand, provides perhaps the only empirical example of how national foreign policies can be achieved more efficiently and hence successfully by fine tuning and clustering potentially divergent national interests. As such, it can teach a lesson to the world: there is strength in unity and the smartest way to actually achieve one’s foreign policy, cultural or other, is by joining other countries that would otherwise also lack the power, independence, and sovereignty to fully achieve their.

Promoting certain cultural expressions bears the inherent risk of commodifying them. This leads to the trap of the ‘culture industry’, as has been well described by German social philosophers Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno. It turns out that culture is similar to religion in that it does not always fare well when promoted by states. To complicate matters still further, from a US perspective, the quest to promote cul-
A vibrant public sphere

Similarly, the decision about whose cultural expressions deserve support is necessarily value-laden and in most cases biased towards the cultural expressions of the rich. It is not immediately obvious why supporting opera is more important than supporting card games or bingo venues. Supporting and promoting culture, in short, is inherently problematic and runs the risk of favouring one cultural expression over another. As populations almost everywhere are becoming increasingly multicultural, this risk is now unavoidable.

When analysed from a social science angle, culture and language must play a central role in promoting a shared public sphere. After all, as philosopher Jürgen Habermas has explained at length, a vibrant democracy relies on a vibrant public sphere, where controversial ideas and proposals are discussed by a broad spectrum of citizens. The EU’s oft-cited ‘democratic deficit’ has its roots in the non-existence of a European public that is able to discuss European politics and thus not only legitimise European politics and policies, but also European politicians. The latter remain relatively unknown to the general public and their actions seem only tenuously connected to the interests of those they ‘represent’.

Those of us who believe in democracy, dialogue, and the overcoming of national borders and conflicts hope to see the EU actually practising what has been theorised about and desired for so long: a legitimate supranational democracy based on a vibrant public exchange of ideas and preferences through different deliberative channels and mechanisms.

However, the first, sine-qua-non condition for this to occur still remains unmet in the European Union: a shared language so that people from different countries can communicate and understand each other. This is a necessary though still inadequate condition for a European public sphere – and it can only be advanced by promoting language learning and interchange. Therefore democrats around the world hope that programmes promoting inter-European interchange and dialogue – such as Erasmus – will attract increasing support and adherence in order to enable the gradual formation of a European public.

Overcoming national borders and divisive cultural practices that highlight differences rather than commonalities is the most important and, dare I say, ‘noblest’ task of any cultural policy. This is even more the case in a world where ‘normality’ has come to mean ‘nation state’. This is why democrats all over the world, that is to say, people who believe in the power of collective decision-making and the importance of dialogue and deliberation, think of the EU as an unfinished project – but also as a promise. Europe is not an exception to the rule, but a crucially important case that has the power to demonstrate that overcoming national interests is possible and that much good can come from cooperation, including greater influence and power on the world scene.

A national foreign policy, cultural or otherwise, cannot by its very definition avoid promoting national interests over others and in most cases over all others. As such, it is not a viable, let alone desirable, utopia. In a game where everyone plays against everyone else and where the players’ sole motivation for action is the promotion of their own self-interest, any possible outcome is sub-optimal and unsustainable in the long run, as marginal returns will necessarily decline over time. We expect the EU to work out and live up to its potential and promise so it can serve all of us as a model and provide us with the guidance and the arguments we need against all those who argue that there is no alternative to national competition.

Bernd Reiter is Professor of Political Science and Latin American Studies at the University of South Florida in Tampa. His research interests include democracy, civil rights, participation, civil society and education.