Cultural Diplomacy in a World of Conflict. The Relationship Between Culture and Empire

Keynote Speech at the International Conference on Cultural Diplomacy, "Promoting Global Collaboration, Unity and Peace through Cultural Diplomacy"

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Theme: History

"Since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defences of peace must be constructed." *This is how UNESCO, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, defines its mission in the first sentence of its Constitution, adopted shortly after the end of the Second World War; and this is how the role of culture must be seen in the context of worldwide tension and conflict today. In our era of global interconnectedness and interdependence, issues of culture and cultural identity have indeed become of crucial importance for peace – irrespective of whether we subscribe to Samuel Huntington's earlier diagnosis or not.[1] In order to understand and properly evaluate the meaning of "cultural" diplomacy, we shall briefly reflect on the nature of culture in the context of politics, and in particular of international relations.[2]*

As the most comprehensive framework of reference for a community's self-realization in its unique *Lebenswelt* ("life-world," to borrow from **Edmund Husserl'**s phenomenology),[3] culture, through all of history, has proven its resilience vis-à-vis political power, even in the form of military force. The ancient Greek world-view – expressed in philosophy, science and arts – shaped cultural identity in the powerful Roman Empire that conquered the Greek city states; Arab-Islamic culture – to give just one other example – was able to survive under the Mongol Empire where each of the successor states adopted the dominant local religion (a point particularly stressed by **Amy Chua** in her far-reaching analysis of the importance of cultural inclusiveness and tolerance for the building of empires).[4] Culture rooted in religion has proven particularly resilient vis-à-vis political power as has been evident in the eventual fate of Marxism-Leninism in the former Soviet Empire (including in occupied Afghanistan), of Western-inspired modernism under the Shah of Iran, or of a dogmatic version of secularism in the Turkish Republic.

In world history, **culture has indeed shaped politics**; in the other direction, the influence was often much less successful, and certainly less sustainable. Even as regards the history of colonialism, the verdict is still out. Where the conqueror did not, or was not able to, eliminate the native population, the invader's culture was often simply superimposed over indigenous traditions that, in turn, redefined and reshaped the dominant culture. This is also evident in the practice of the Christian faith under African or South American traditions. **The relationship between culture and empire**[5] is certainly more complex than the advocates of cultural supremacy have been willing to admit through the centuries; it is definitely not unidirectional.[6]

Unlike culture (or, as its most general expression, civilization), politics is not necessarily a *comprehensive* phenomenon, driven by the human desire to understand, and interpret, the world as such and defining man's position in it. In the real – not to be confused with the ideal – world, relations between political entities have always been a competition for power, motivated by the pursuit of the "national interest."[7] It is a historical reality that those interests – always oriented towards the "good life" of the nation – have all too often been asserted in the course of war. In all such situations, issues of culture and cultural identity have been subordinated to political considerations. Culture has often been instrumentalized for the purposes of legitimation. As is again the case in our time, in the era of a "global war on terror," the international use of force (in the service of national interests) is justified as defense of "civilization" against its enemies.[8]

However, if war is the "continuation of politics by other means," as von Clausewitz famously said,[9] one may ask the question whether **cultural diplomacy (that belongs to the realm of politics) can help to prevent, or curb, conflict – or at least contribute to a negotiated settlement?** In the political context, and even more so in international relations, we must be aware of the "dual use" aspect of culture (if I may borrow, for a moment, from arms control terminology). Especially in situations of armed confrontation, culture can be an element of *indoctrination* as well as of *education*. While the former means the instrumentalization of cultural identity in the service of war *propaganda*, the latter relates to *information* that may help to expose stereotypes and overcome prejudice.

Regrettably, at the beginning of the 21st century, the former aspect appears to have become the dominant one. Many of the looming confrontations and ongoing conflicts are portrayed in the framework of a "clash of civilizations," namely a vicious cycle of cultural stereotyping and use of force.[10] This has been particularly the case with so-called humanitarian interventions that have become a typical feature of post-Cold War power politics, and have been part of a wider strategic agenda of "régime change" – with devastating consequences for peace and stability far beyond the affected regions. The instrumentalization of notions such as "democracy," "human rights," "rule of law" for essentially political purposes has not only discredited those values and ideals, but has become a major obstacle to a stable and peaceful world order. Cultural *exclusivism* – the insistence on one's own world-view and value system as being the *universal* one – has provoked perpetual resistance and produced counter-narratives from other cultural communities. How can, in such a confrontational

scenario, issues of culture and cultural identity play again a constructive role?

What is needed is a *grand design of cultural diplomacy* that must be shaped by the recognition of *mutuality* (i.e. an understanding that cultural cooperation is essentially a *two-way project*), and that is aware of the *integral* aspect of culture, which may be described by our notion of the "dialectics of cultural self-comprehension."[11] Culture can never flourish in an insular, abstract realm; accordingly, it must be propagated in a dialogical manner. Thus, cultural foreign policy as such is not compatible with an imperialist[12] agenda – not to speak of an agenda of war. *Culture is not a mere corollary of politics, but a defining element of it*. Only if politicians realize that there is no supremacy of politics over culture is there space for meaningful, and effective, cultural diplomacy. It is here where the role of UNESCO must be acknowledged.

At the present juncture of world affairs, the crucial question for cultural diplomacy will be whether it will evade the trap of the "clash of civilizations."[13] If there is to be a real chance for cultural diplomacy to have an impact on international developments under the adverse circumstances of today's many conflicts, it must be more than a mere *decorum* of regular diplomatic business. The goal of cultural diplomacy, as part of a state's conduct of foreign affairs, must be an honest and integral sharing of a nation's (people's) life-world with other nations (comprising its distinct value system with all forms of art and lifestyle) – not only bilaterally, but also multilaterally. Only this is in accordance with UNESCO's philosophical vision of overcoming "ignorance of each other's ways and lives" that, in the words of its Constitution, throughout history has nurtured "suspicion and mistrust between the peoples of the world through which their differences have all too often broken into war."[14] Thus, the approach must be inclusive and based not only on national self-assertion and pride, but on "cultural curiosity" at the same time. Ideally, the pursuit of cultural diplomacy in the global context should be an element of what the United Nations Organization, following the proposal of **President Mohamad Khatami** of Iran, has propagated as "dialogue of civilizations."[15] Instead of fuelling aggressive attitudes that may lead to war (as has so often been the case in history), culture must be asserted, and thus developed, in a context of cooperation and mutual exploration of reality by <u>all</u> nations. In its true, namely *inclusive*, sense, culture is always a joint project of mankind, namely a realization of our *common* life-world that is based on the very universality of the mind.[16]

However, if we follow this philosophical ideal, serious credibility issues arise for cultural diplomacy under conditions of realpolitik. To stress it yet again: As a matter of principle, culture must not exclusively be used as a political tool or an instrument of power politics, as tempting as this may be for countries with global ambitions and responsibilities. The integrity of cultural diplomacy depends on the honesty of the message that is not to be tainted by "second thoughts." An instrumental, or functionalist, approach is not only incompatible with culture as such, but also politically counterproductive. In this regard, the understanding of culture as an element of "soft power" may have to be reconsidered. To give just one, admittedly drastic, example: If culture is brought on the bayonets of an invader, this will not only discredit the invader's self-proclaimed mission, but do more harm than good even according to that country's strategic calculations. In such cases, the reassertion of identity on the part of the subjugated will be much stronger and the long-term prospects of stability in the concerned region will be much dimmer. The events in the wider Middle East since the beginning of the new century – and the chain reaction of cultural alienation and destabilization in other parts of the world triggered by those events – are a case in point.

As a result of these developments, a credibility (or consistency) issue has also evolved in terms of the crisis of today's "multicultural society." International conflicts, often followed by civil wars such as those in the Middle East, have further exacerbated tensions between cultural and religious communities in other parts of the world. In the era of globalization, the challenges have become almost insurmountable especially as relations between Islam and the non-Muslim world are concerned. How can countries where bias against another culture or religion has entered the social mainstream – and has begun to shape those countries' domestic and international policies – credibly assert their national (i.e. "traditional") identity vis-à-vis the rest of the world? Or, to say it more bluntly: How can cultural diplomacy be practiced in an atmosphere of hatred and prejudice where the exploitation of stereotypes has become part of the political game (i.e. of party politics)? The credibility problem exists on <u>all</u> sides of the cultural divide. How can countries successfully "market" their culture (including their language, poetry, arts and sports) in a constellation where mutual incriminations (in reference to cultural, in particular religious, issues) characterize the day-to-day interaction between those countries? In more general terms: How can a country be credible internationally as a "messenger of culture" that domestically antagonizes or oppresses other cultures? It is important here to stress that the notion of "leading culture" (or "guiding culture," *Leitkultur*), often referred to in *domestic* debates in Germany, must not be interpreted in the sense of a dogmatic value statement because this would exclude dialogue or co-existence between cultures at the *international* level.

 In conclusion: Against all these challenges in today's conflict-ridden global environment, **cultural diplomacy may play a constructive, even crucial, role – <u>when</u> and <u>if</u> the protagonists avoid the Machiavellian temptation to use culture, and issues of cultural identity, as a political *tool*.** In situations of tension and conflict, violent measures – except in cases of self-defense – are not necessarily the most efficient ones, not to speak of their illegality under modern international law. What is important in such circumstances is a creative, non-dogmatic approach – which is the quintessence of diplomacy. This is exactly the advantage of *culture* because it appeals to the *universal* nature of the human being – unlike politics that is, unavoidably, the management of group egoism (conventionally described as the "national interest").

If understood in the *integrative* and *comprehensive* sense we have described here, cultural diplomacy may serve a constructive role in the building of an order of peaceful coexistence among nations.[17] In order to be *credible* and *efficient* at the same time, it should embrace the idea of dialogical relations between cultures and civilizations on the basis of equality. Sovereign equality of nations, a basic principle of the United Nations Charter, must include sovereign equality of cultures. Only this will allow the conduct of diplomatic relations on the basis of mutuality.

Against this background, initiatives of cultural diplomacy may help to create a climate that is conducive to the settlement of conflicts and disputes through negotiations. In certain situations, culture in the widest sense (including sports) may indeed be the "icebreaker" and pave the ground for further confidence-building measures. The "ping-pong diplomacy" of April 1971 that preceded, or initiated, the thaw, indeed the establishment of diplomatic relations, between the United States and Communist China, culminating in the historical visit of President Nixon in Beijing in 1972, is one of the most colorful examples. Other examples where culture played a constructive role in a conflictual environment are the joint hosting of the FIFA World Cup 2002 by former enemies Japan and South Korea or the series of concerts, in September 2010, of the Youth Symphony Orchestra of the Commonwealth of

Independent States (CIS), including musicians from Armenia and Azerbaijan, in the two countries' capitals. In a constellation where both South Caucasian countries were still technically at war over the unresolved Nagorno Karabakh conflict, the ensemble took a direct flight from Baku to Yerevan with the former Culture Ministers of both countries on board. This *multilateral* initiative, though not followed up by bilateral measures or negotiations, is a particularly creative example how culture can build bridges, or brake political taboos, in otherwise intractable situations.[18]

Will the philosophical ideal of culture as common denominator of the *conditio humana* stand the test of reality? Cultural diplomacy is indeed most effective when it is *embedded* in a wider policy of peace. At the same time, it *reinforces* such policy. If it is used as a tool of ideological confrontation, indeed a corollary of war, culture is not only losing its creative force, but becoming devoid of any content; it is made sterile and "useless" in terms of the advancement of humanity. While the *instrumentalization* of culture for interventionist policies can make the thesis of the "clash of civilizations" a self-fulfilling prophecy, the *honest* pursuit of cultural diplomacy means the renunciation of any form of cultural exceptionalism. **It paves the ground for a global dialogue of civilizations as foundation of peace – a peace that eventually will be more durable than an order of inter-state relations that is the result of an always fragile – and constantly fluctuating – balance of power.**

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Notes

[1] Samuel Huntington, "The Clash of Civilizations?" in: *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 72, No. 3 (Summer 1993), pp. 22-49.

[2] In its inaugural conference in 1974, the International Progress Organization, has made an effort – in cooperation with the United Nations Organization and UNESCO – to define the international role of culture, particularly in view of peaceful co-existence among states: Hans Köchler, Cultural Self-comprehension of Nations. Studies in International [Cultural] Relations, Vol. I. Tübingen/Basel: Erdmann, 1978.

[3] Edmund Husserl, *Die Krisis der europaischen Wissenschaften und die transzendentale Phänomenologie*. Erganzungsband: *Texte aus dem Nachlass, 1934-1937*. Husserliana, Vol. 29. Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1993.

[4] *Day of Empire: How Hyperpowers Rise to Global Dominance – and Why They Fail*. New York: Doubleday, 2007.

[5] See also Hans Köchler, "Culture and Empire: The Imperial Claim to Cultural Supremacy versus the Dialectics of Cultural Identity," in: Hans Köchler, *Force or Dialogue: Conflicting Paradigms of World Order*. Ed. David Armstrong. New Delhi: Manak, 2015, pp. 263-273.

[6] The importance of culture in power relations is not to be underestimated. In the process of empire building, cultural policy was not necessarily a one-way road. It was not always, and not necessarily so,

about implanting the conqueror's culture into the subjugated civilization, but often also – for reasons that nowadays would be labeled "realpolitik" – about "adopting" the culture of the militarily and politically subjugated into the empire. The culture of the subjugated and militarily weaker party (especially when it is more elaborate or refined) may not only enrich, but also eventually transform, the culture of the invader/conqueror (as was the case in the Roman Empire).

[7] See esp. Hans Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*. 3rd ed. New York: Knopf, 1960.

[8] For details see Hans Köchler, "The Global War on Terror and the Metaphysical Enemy," in: Hans Köchler (ed.), *The "Global War on Terror" and the Question of World Order*. Studies in International Relations, Vol. XXX. Vienna: International Progress Organization, 2008, pp. 13-35.

[9] "Der Krieg ist eine bloße Fortsetzung der Politik mit anderen Mitteln." Carl von Clausewitz, *Vom Kriege* (1812), Book I, Chapter 1, Paragraph 24.

[10] There exists a relationship of interdependence. Stereotypes (whether in regard to religion or culture and race in a more general sense) are used to legitimize the use of force, and the latter reinforces those stereotypes on both sides of the divide.

[11] Hans Köchler, *Cultural-philosophical Aspects of International Cooperation*. Studies in International [Cultural] Relations, Vol. II. Vienna: International Progress Organization, 1978.

[12] This term must not be confused with the adjective "imperial."

[13] On the notion see Hans Köchler, "Clash of civilizations," in: Bryan S. Turner, Kyung-Sup Chang, Cynthia F. Epstein, Peter Kivisto, J. Michael Ryan, William Outhwaite (eds.), *The Wiley Blackwell Encyclopedia of Social Theory*, Vol. I. Chichester, West Sussex (UK): Wiley-Blackwell, 2017.

[14] UNESCO, *Constitution*, 16 November 1945, Preamble.

[15] On the basis of Khatami's initiative, the United Nations proclaimed (before the events of September 11) the year 2001 as the United Nations' *Year of Dialogue Among Civilizations*.

[16] For details see Hans Köchler, *Religious Identity and Universality of the Mind: Reflections on Co-existence in a Globalized World*. Keynote Lecture, "All Faiths and None" – Inter-Faith Forum, organized by Trinity College Theological Society and TCD Equality Fund, Trinity College, Dublin, Ireland, 19 February 2013.

[17] See also Hans Köchler, "Unity in Diversity: The Integrative Approach to Intercultural Relations," in: *UN Chronicle*, Vol. XLIX, No. 3 (2012), pp. 7-10.

[18] In terms of sports, one might also mention here the famous "Christmas Truce" of 1914, along the Western Front of World War I, when British and German soldiers, on Christmas Day, played football in

the no man's land between the frontlines (for details see Mike Dash, *The Story of the WWI Christmas Truce*. 23 December 2011, at https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/the-story-of-the-wwi-christmas-truce-11972213), or the participation of the North Korean team in the 1966 FIFA World Cup in the United Kingdom. For details see Hans Köchler, *The Dialogue of Civilizations: Philosophical Basis, Political Dimensions and the Impact of International Sporting Events.* Occasional Papers Series, No. 5. Vienna: International Progress Organization, 2002.

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