Selling Democracy? The Past and Future of Western Cultural Relations and Public Diplomacy

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The very title of this two-day conference, sponsored and organized by the University of Leicester and Counterpoint, the cultural relations think-tank of the British Council, made certain assumptions about the value of democratic forms to Western society, and as such was not designed to be a discussion on democracy per se. There were no democratic possibilities for the definition of democracy - rather, the participants operated within a broad and loose definition of democracy that generally agreed to be synonymous with Western democracy. Working with an inferred set of democratic principles, the primary focus of this conference was on the method of transmitting certain particular democratic values to peoples and populations not hitherto subscribing to them, or being granted the freedom to subscribe to them, including human rights and freedom of expression that have traditionally formed the spine of a pan-Atlantic postwar consensus. The conference

sought to not only to trace the traditions of government-sponsored persuasion, from rhetoric and propaganda to public diplomacy, but to advance fresh ways of connecting and communicating with populations previously deemed unreachable. By drawing upon the experiences of diplomatic operatives, and merging the concrete actualities of practicing diplomats and public policy workers from the Foreign Office, Overseas Development Office, policy institutes from the Netherlands and such like, with researchers looking at the historical use of 'soft diplomacy', such as cultural exchanges and English language teaching in the immediately post-war period, through the Cold War and into the present unsettled period of the 'War on Terror' and the campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq, it was considered possible to arrive at a formula for future outreach projects. The idea of the conference was explicitly present-minded, to clarify whether, 'traditional tools (of diplomacy) are still adequate, or whether fundamentally new approaches to Public Diplomacy and Cultural relations are needed.'

I shall only comment on the historical application of cultural diplomacy in depth owing to the quantity and quality of the many papers presented. Papers relating to the history of cultural relations were organized into two main sessions on the opening day of the conference, with a panel of four contributors and a chair in each case. With an attendance in excess of some forty experts and interested laypersons, the first panel of academics presented new research papers under the heading 'The history of Public Relations and Cultural Diplomacy'. The presenters and their paper titles were as follows: Dana Magill Cooper, Texas Christian University: Rhodes to Success: Cecil Rhodes and the Establishment of Academic Exchange as a study of Cultural Diplomacy; Alice Byre, Universite de Provence: Britain Today, the British Council's Periodical 1939-54, David J Synder, Southern Illinois University and Fulbright Fellow: The Largest Retarding Factor: Gender, Society and USIS Information Policy in the Netherlands; and Brian C Etheridge, Louisiana Tech University: Germany's New Campaign: Selling the German Nation to Cold War America.

Inevitably, with such a plethora of papers addressing such a wide range of subject areas full paper summaries are impossible. However, there was a general consensus that combating skepticism was an issue that, although particularly resonant with today's issues, was by no means a new challenge, and that insensitive uses of information, however accurate, were likely to result in communication breakdown rather than enhancement. In a sense it was rec-

ognized that 'telling the truth' about national interests and designs was no longer a sufficient means of insuring success in instilling certain values within target populations, and that the reception of these 'messages' relied upon understanding the cultural, ideological, and religious make-up of those populations which profoundly affect their likely response to this material. The 'motive factor' was something that underpinned the concerns of both the USIS and British Government's Cold War cultural and information propaganda strategies. Motive can never be absent from action, and thus the thesis, accepted early on in diplomacy work, was that trying to obscure motive, to dress diplomacy up in some form of altruism was doomed to failure. Thus, the success or relative failure of public and cultural diplomacy was less a result of creating the conditions where democracy was portrayed as the ultimate solution, but in stating that it was not necessarily in conflict with other belief systems. The papers conceded that the direct communication of the 'superiority of democracy', even within pre-World War Two programmes had little success, and that it had been more fruitful to establish a discourse of 'mutual understanding', which communicated democratic values in a non-competitive environment.

The second panel followed much the same pattern, but focused on American and British cultural diplomacy during the Cold War within specific geographical locations, mainly around the Middle East. The contributors were again, as follows; Alistair Fisher, University of Birmingham: Learning Lessons from the Americans - American Studies in Early Cold War Europe; James Vaughan, University of Wales: From the Ikhwan al-Hurriya to the Jambassadors: Anglo-American Cultural Diplomacy in the Middle East, 1945-1955; Peter Robinson, University of Sussex: The First Anglo-Soviet Cultural Agreement: A watershed in Cultural Co-operation, or a Concession to Formalization?; Brent M Geary, Ohio University. In general these papers tended towards the political, focussed on the consequences of American and British cultural relations diplomacy, and thus insufficiently problematised the dynamics of communication, of infiltration, and adopted a policy-led top-down approach to their historical analysis. The strategy of the British and American Governments was not reconciled with the cognitive effect on target groups. This shortcoming perhaps mirrored the relevant organizations' own obsession with forcible cultural penetration, through news media, cultural exchanges, and visiting manifestations. This was later a theme hinted at in Professor Taylor's keynote address under the title 'Fiddling while Rome burns? Public Diplomacy, Cultural Relations and the Post-Iraq World.'

One of the key issues raised in several of the papers was that the advent of new media forms such as the internet and mobile phones as well as other wireless technologies, has made it far more desirable for cultural initiatives which have 'democracy in tow' to be promoted by non or quasi-governmental bodies, and thereby in part obviating the suspicion that accompanies government controlled schemes. Paul Madden, Assistant Director of Information at the Foreign Office, in his polemic which followed on the heels of the historical contextualisation emphasized the value of cultural diplomacy, the necessity of communicating with peoples directly without the mediation of governments, wherever and whenever possible. By steadily dissolving the overt participation of governments from cultural interactions it was felt that there could be a greater degree of separation between politics and mutual understanding.

Peter Robinson (p.robinson@sussex.ac.uk) is currently completing an MA in Intellectual History at the University of Sussex. He is a co-editor of *Studies in Social and Political Thought* as well as a freelance researcher, particularly in the area of cultural relations, and was himself a contributor to the conference, 'Selling Democracy? The Past and Future of Western Cultural Relations and Public Diplomacy'.