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From practice to concept: paving the way to a theoretical approach to international cultural relations

Andrew Murray and Alessandro Giovanni Lamonica

Abstract

Over the last decades, as a result of historical contingency, inter-institutional and political dynamics, a new kind of state-driven cultural relations has developed in Europe, first in the activities of the British Council and the Goethe Institut and then in the approach taken by the EU to culture and external relations. We argue that this practice has reached a stage in its development that justifies an attempt to systematise and make explicit what until now has been largely implicit. Consequently, this paper offers an update to the traditional categories depicting the role of culture in international relations, that is, the dichotomous relationship between cultural relations and cultural diplomacy. It does so by adding a new analytical dimension to the actor-based understanding of international cultural practices and by introducing a new corresponding conceptual category, namely 'international cultural relations'. International cultural relations take place when governmental actors attempt to foster international cooperation in support of the common good. To do so, they use an argumentative approach to dialogue and cooperation, empowering international institutions to work at arm's length from government, building long-term transnational people-to-people relationships based on trust and non-transactional mutuality.

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Introduction

The critical role played by culture in international relations (IR), having been ignored by academics and policymakers for decades, is at last being recognised. National agencies like the British Council (the Council) in the United Kingdom (UK) and the Goethe Institut in Germany, forerunners in state-driven ‘cultural relations’, are stepping up their research efforts to provide evidence for the value added by their programmes and projects to secure and increase their governments’ support. The European Union (EU) has begun the implementation of a strategic approach to culture in external relations based very much on the Anglo-German model: carried out at arm’s length from the State, using an anthropological definition of culture, driven by the values of mutuality and reciprocity, and with the objective of building long-term, trust-based relationships. Even countries used to employing culture largely as a tool for strategic communication, such as Russia and China, are investigating the potential of an ‘arm’s length’ cultural engagement strategy (British Council, 2021).

At the same time, there is an urgent need in today’s world for an approach to international relations which can help create the conditions for international dialogue and cooperation. The COVID-19 pandemic has further deteriorated the relationship between the United States (US) and China, it has accelerated a global economic recession that was already expected in 2020, and it will further weaken the grip of liberal multilateral institutions on state behaviour (Isernia and Lamonica, 2021). A strengthening of isolationism and power politics in an impoverished world may in the long term dismantle multilateral cooperation just when it is most needed to tackle the global challenges of climate change, inequality and the pandemic itself.

We argue that these concomitant phenomena should persuade practitioners and academics to join forces to fill the gap between theory and practice: currently state-driven ‘cultural relations’ are based upon practice but have little or no relationship to cultural or international relations theory. This practice has now reached a stage in its development that justifies a systematisation effort. Decades of institutional practices and a ‘species leap’ from the national to the supranational level call academics to undertake a reflection that goes beyond the limited scope of the theory of change of a cultural programme and overcomes the traditional dichotomy between culture as diplomacy and culture as relations. Moreover, a clear conceptual framework is a much-needed tool for practitioners to advocate and for policymakers to justify their choices and assess their effectiveness by developing robust analytical tools.

This paper acknowledges the coming into being of this new practice, namely state-driven ‘cultural relations’, and the related conceptual ambiguity nurtured by an overlapping and conflicting terminology. The term ‘cultural relations’ has come to be used by some state actors as a replacement for previously used notions, such as cultural diplomacy, to describe their external cultural policies. As a consequence, in current literature and institutional practice it is often hard to distinguish between cultural relations as they are imagined and deployed by states and cultural relations as a traditional conceptual cluster based on the absence of the state and built-in opposition to ‘cultural diplomacy’. However, while some scholars tend to assume that these different terms are used interchangeably (Mitchell, 1986), making them “floating signifier[s]” (Isar, 2015, p. 367), this paper calls for a new approach to the differentiation of cultural practices in IR and it tries to offer an update to the traditional categories depicting the role of culture in international relations.

To do so, a historical genealogy of state-driven 'cultural relations' as an alternative practice is offered first taking the cases of the British Council and the EU strategic approach. Second, a new bi-dimensional typology accounting for both the variety of actors and the different processes characterising international cultural interactions is described to differentiate among cultural diplomacy, NGO diplomacy, international cultural relations, and cultural relations. Third, this typology is used to position the approach taken by the British Council and the EU and set the conceptual boundaries of the practices attached to it. Accordingly, an 'axiological' description of international cultural relations as a cluster of practices is introduced to match state-driven 'cultural relations' with its corresponding concept.

The birth and evolution of the state-driven 'cultural relations' approach: The case of the British Council

The cultural relations approach to culture in external relations was originally developed by the British Council, an institution created by the British Government between the period 1934 and 1940 as a realist response to the threats posed by German and Italian propaganda. Over the next six decades its staff – 'British Council Officers', as they were and still are called – developed this approach in an iterative and piecemeal fashion, partly as a result of a general distrust of theory bordering on anti-intellectualism, but also as a defensive tactic against the permanent danger of becoming a government department and losing its operational independence. This was not done in a self-conscious way. There was no cultural relations 'theory' taught to new recruits when they joined the organisation as well-educated and well-travelled generalists, once recruited, were expected to 'learn by doing' and from being mentored by their superiors. Nevertheless, when the first steps were taken to define a theoretical approach to state-driven 'cultural relations' – the first description and analysis of this approach as we know it now dates from 2004 (Rose and Wadham-Smith, 2004) – in retrospect elements of the approach were present at the birth of the British Council.

If we look to when the term began to be used to describe an approach to cultural diplomacy, we find that the term 'cultural relations' was first used in this way in a British Foreign Office memorandum in 1934 which recommended the setting up of a Cultural Relations Committee to oversee the finance and policy of a function to promote British culture abroad. The Committee only met twice before it was replaced in November 1934 by 'The British Committee for Relations with Other Countries'; this name was changed to 'The British Council for Relations with Other Countries' in 1935 and the following year to 'The British Council'.

The British had come very late to the use of culture in foreign policy and had missed out entirely on the first phase of the history of European national cultural institutes, what Paschalidis (2009) has called the 'cultural nationalism' period of 1870 to 1914, when Italy, Germany, France and Greece had developed their own embryonic networks of cultural institutes abroad, organised and financed by civil society organisations working with diaspora communities. It was not until after the First World War that the State in these countries began to administer and finance these networks and turn them into effective means of producing 'cultural propaganda' (Paschalidis, 2009).

The reasons behind the reluctance of the British to develop an external cultural policy are in part an explanation for the state-driven 'cultural relations' approach, or at least the

'arm's length' component of it. Francis Donaldson, in her history of the British Council published on the 50th anniversary of its creation, observed that the education of the British ruling elites of the interwar period put a low value on the arts and literature, and that they had an "arrogant reticence based upon the training to regard all forms of self-display as obnoxious" (Donaldson, 1984, p. 11). Donaldson also suggests that the experience of having to engage in wartime propaganda created such distaste among the elite that "for many years anything which smacked even faintly of organised publicity [was] regarded in official circles with extreme wariness" (Donaldson, 1984, p. 32). Thus, it should come as no surprise that the first annual grant from the Treasury for its first year of operation, 1935-36, was just £5,000. During the same year Donaldson points out the French, German and Italian governments were spending £5 million on cultural propaganda (Donaldson, 1984). Funding was increased as the threat of war grew near (£130,000 in 1939), spent mainly to support the teaching of English in British Institutes in Europe and the Eastern Mediterranean, the supply of books and periodicals to the institutes' libraries, and bursaries and scholarships for study in the UK.

The British Council was granted a Royal Charter in 1940 along the same lines as the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), establishing it as "a permanent institution of the realm" and granting it a measure of institutional independence. The Charter proved to be an invaluable bulwark against a wartime attempt to put it under the control of the Ministry of Information: the independence of the British Council from overt political control for propaganda purposes was enshrined in the Charter, a crucial element of the state-driven 'cultural relations' approach. The Charter stated that the mission of the Council was to promote "a wider knowledge of the United Kingdom [and] the English language" abroad and developing "closer cultural relationships and the understanding of different cultures between [the UK] and other countries" (British Council, 2011, n.d.). Lord Lloyd, Chairman of the British Council from 1937 to 1941, explained the reasoning behind this need for independence:

"We should give the world free access to our civilization, and free opportunity to form its own judgement on our outlook and motives [...] we have in many places a wary and critical audience to convert, but our opponents lack of discretion has worked largely in our favour. Everywhere we find people turning with relief from the harshly dominant notes of totalitarian propaganda to the less insistent and more reasonable cadences of Britain. We do not force them to 'think British', we offer them the opportunity of learning what the British think" (Donaldson, 1984, p. 57).

The apolitical character of the Council was re-affirmed in its annual report of 1940:

"(our purpose is) to create in a country overseas a basis of friendly knowledge and understanding of the people of this country, of their philosophy and way of life, which will lead to a sympathetic appreciation of British foreign policy, whatever for the moment that policy may be and from whatever political conviction it may spring" (British Council, 1941, pp. 19-20).

That the goal of state-driven 'cultural relations' should be long-term and the building of relationships based on trust, rather than short-term political objectives, were thus present from the early years of the Council. The Board of the British Council and its senior

management cadre attempted to distance themselves from the State so that their work would not be driven by the government of the day and thereby be perceived as ‘propaganda’. A ‘people-to-people’ methodology naturally followed from this arm’s length approach. Wherever possible British Council offices were established as physically separate entities apart from the British Embassy or High Commission.

Another element of the state-driven ‘cultural relations’ approach was also evident in the early days of the Council’s existence: the values of mutuality and reciprocity. Ali Fisher’s history of the British Council, published on its 75th anniversary, quotes a 1947 internal report: “The longer one is engaged in cultural relations work the clearer becomes the essentially reciprocal nature of the operation, and the clearer the wisdom of the maxim that each party should give the other what the other wants, rather than what the giver thinks is good for him” (Fisher, 2009, p. 28).

The last element of this approach, that is, the expansion of the concept of culture beyond the arts and literature, took much longer to become the norm, though it could be argued that it was first recognised during the Second World War when the Council was made officially responsible for the education and cultural welfare of refugees and exiles in the United Kingdom. Educational centres were established throughout the UK to host thousands of displaced persons and education, particularly support for Higher Education through its responsibility for university links overseas and then UK university recruitment overseas, became an important strand of the Council’s work in the 1950s and 1960s. When in the 1970s it took on contracts for the supply of technical assistance to ex-colonies for the aid arm of British Government (the Overseas Development Administration), the Council provided education and training to almost every sector including health, tourism, and justice. And in the 1990s, under the auspices of the British Government’s Know How Fund, the Council provided business consultancy services to the newly emerging private sectors in Central and Eastern Europe. ‘Culture’ was now an umbrella concept encompassing much more than the arts and literature.

Our activities extend over a huge spectrum, including educational promotion and provision at all levels, creativity of every kind through our arts and science programmes, governance training, human rights projects, support for education reform, and training for community and sports leadership. In short, our work is not abstract: the British Council strives to ensure that the partners and users with whom we engage gain aesthetic, vocational or enabling benefit so that they can value the engagement, contribute to it with confidence, and – on that basis – develop trust (Fisher, 2009, p. 3).

Taken from Neil Kinnock’s foreword to Ali Fisher’s history of the British Council, the state-driven ‘cultural relations’ approach as practiced by the British Council was now at its apogee. It is no coincidence that the first attempt to analyse and explain it as theory was published shortly afterwards in 2004: Martin Rose and Nick Wadham-Smith’s ‘Mutuality, trust and cultural relations’. In his preface to the study, the then Director-General, David Green, pointed out that: “To us, mutuality provides a way of eschewing one-way traffic in cultural relations, of giving equal value to differing cultures, and of ensuring that benefit accrues to all parties in the building up of long-term, sustainable relationships built on trust. We believe that in applying this principle, the sum of human relationships will be strengthened, and the

international standing of the United Kingdom improved” (Rose and Wadham-Smith, 2004, p. 3).

Rose and Wadham-Smith defined two roles played by the Council: a Public Diplomacy role, when it acted on behalf of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) and as an agent of government, and a cultural relations role, outlined by David Green, “based upon the fact and the perception of our independence” from government (Rose and Wadham-Smith, 2004, p. 5) and the centrality of mutuality as a core value. They argued that the then mission of the FCO – i.e., to promote “the UK’s interests in a safe, just and prosperous world” – was best served by the British Council when it was delivering the state-driven ‘cultural relations’ approach. It was an argument based partly upon the belief that there was a “direct link between moral input and geopolitical impact” (Rose and Wadham-Smith, 2004, p. 54), and it reflected to a certain extent the ethical foreign policy pursued by Robin Cook during his term as Foreign Secretary (1997-2001).

Rose and Wadham-Smith recognised that there was no methodology capable of providing measurable evidence to back up this belief: “the challenge is to redefine cultural relations in the light of mutuality and construct a mode of evaluation which will convince both our sponsors and our publics” (Rose and Wadham-Smith, 2004, p. 51). No convincing methodology of evaluation has yet been identified and, unfortunately for the Council, the next two decades were dominated by a government culture of performance against measurable targets. The House of Commons Committee for Foreign Affairs in its report on the British Council in 2006 berated it for its inability to demonstrate its impact and recommended a radical review of the Council’s work.

It was not until a change of government in 2010-11 that a radical review was initiated as part of a proposed ‘cull’ of government agencies. In the Triennial Review of the Council published in 2014, the FCO did not accept the legitimacy of the state-driven ‘cultural relations’ approach and insisted that the British Council saw itself as its cultural diplomacy arm, showcasing the assets of the United Kingdom abroad. As Lamonica has argued, a new “model of UK cultural diplomacy has evolved between 2011 and 2017” (2019, p. 158). This new model is exemplified by the ‘Britain is Great’ showcasing campaign (2012) that a somewhat embarrassed British Council senior management was persuaded into supporting in at least partial contravention of the values and ethos of ‘cultural relations’. Of the two roles described by Rose and Wadham-Smith (2004), the Public Diplomacy role became the leading one for the British Council, almost inevitably given the understandable inability of Council management to demonstrate conclusively the value and impact of the cultural relations in the face of the realist arguments posed by the FCO.

The result of the Brexit referendum in June 2016 might yet prove to be a populist mortal wound to the state-driven ‘cultural relations’ approach as practiced by the British Council; however, there are grounds for optimism. The British Government, in its Integrated Review of Foreign and Defence Policy, published in March 2021, accepts that the British Council should retain its independence from Government and, in an assertion that appears to accord with the principles of the state-driven ‘cultural relations’ approach, that the main role of the State should be to “create a conducive enabling environment in which independent organisations [...] can flourish; assist them in building mutually beneficial international relationships; and harness, where possible, their outputs for global goods” (Cabinet Office, 2021, p. 49).

***From the national to the supranational level:
The EU strategic approach to culture in external relations***

June 2016 was also the month in which the state-driven ‘cultural relations’ approach was adopted by the European Commission and the European External Action Service (EEAS). The Commission and the EEAS published a paper outlining a new approach to the role played by culture in external relations. The Joint Communication ‘Towards an EU Strategy for international cultural relations’ recommended that the EU should adopt an approach to culture in external relations driven by the values of mutuality and reciprocity, primarily concerned with ‘people-to-people’ relations rather than State-to-people ones, with a long-term perspective, a wide and deep definition of culture, and implemented via an arm’s length approach, from the ‘bottom up’ via a decentralised partnership between EU Delegations and member states’ national cultural institutes.

That the baton of cultural relations appeared to have been handed over from the British Council to the EU in 2016 resulted from an initiative undertaken by the British Council ten years earlier. In 2006, when the British Council leadership was still confident enough to promote its ideas about culture and external relations outside the UK and was less concerned about protecting the approach from internal attacks, its Director General, David Green, sowed the seeds of the approach in the EU by persuading other European national cultural institutes to create a members’ association: the European Union National Institutes of Culture (EUNIC).

Despite the fact that nearly all of the members practiced traditional cultural diplomacy, the strategic approach embedded in the statutes was the state-driven ‘cultural relations’ approach. This was partly a result of the leadership role taken by David Green, but almost as important was the support provided by the Secretary-General of the Goethe Institut, Hans-Georg Knopp. The Goethe Institut had adopted the approach in two stages: in 1970 the German Foreign Office made cultural work involving dialogue and partnership the third pillar of German foreign policy, and in 1976 it followed the British Council in obtaining institutional independence from the federal foreign office.

The British Council largely lost interest in EUNIC shortly after its creation, partly because it shifted its strategic focus to other parts of the world in line with a strategic direction then being taken by the FCO (see Lamonica, 2019). The Goethe Institut stepped into the vacuum left by the Council and since 2012, under the leadership of its Secretary-General Johannes Ebert, pursued with vigour the values of cultural relations. The Goethe Institut won the contract to manage the Preparatory Action ‘Culture in External Relations’ in 2012 and the recommendations of its report were largely adopted by the Joint Communication of June 2016.

The Joint Communication adopted a wide definition of culture, one that included the arts, literature and the creative industries but also encompassed education and research, tourism, and cultural heritage. Its main authors, Walter Zampieri of the Education and Culture DG in the Commission and Diego Marani in the EEAS, proposed a set of guiding principles for a “more strategic EU approach to cultural diplomacy” (European Commission and High Representative 2016, p. 2), one which should “go beyond projecting the diversity of European cultures, and aim at generating a new spirit of dialogue, mutual listening and learning, joint capacity building and global solidarity” (European Commission and High Representative 2016, p. 4). It was recognised that cultural diplomacy based upon showcasing would

continue to be practiced by member states in their national interest; however, the Joint Communication called on them to work with the EU institutions to develop a new joined-up approach to culture and external relations based upon the following principles: the promotion of cultural diversity and respect for human rights, the promotion of mutual respect and intercultural dialogue, respect for complementarity and subsidiarity regarding member states' competence and actions, and the promotion of a comprehensive approach to culture through existing cooperation frameworks. To differentiate its approach from traditional cultural diplomacy, which after all is the competence of member states, the Joint Communication called it 'international cultural relations', a description, as we have seen, already in use for the arms' length activities practiced by the British Council and Goethe Institut and from which much of the thinking had been borrowed, particularly the centrality of the values of mutuality and reciprocity, and the recognition that the ultimate goal of the state-driven 'cultural relations' approach is the achievement of global solidarity in the face of global challenges.

A Framework for Action to implement the EU strategic approach to international cultural relations was adopted by the Council of the European Union in April 2019. The Framework recognised several issues which should be addressed by the Commission and the EEAS: the principles and objectives of the strategic approach still need to be embedded in "the design and implementation of existing and future thematic and geographic frameworks, such as in the context of enlargement, development and ENP countries or strategic partners" (Council of the EU, 2019, p. 6). A solution to the problem is identified in the next recommendations of the Framework for Action: the EU institutions need to "ensure the appropriate expertise in the field of cultural relations" and EU Delegations should have "cultural focal points" equipped with this expertise (Council of the EU, 2019, p. 6).

Action for the member states includes the enhancement of "collaboration between relevant ministries, particularly ministries of culture and foreign affairs" (Council of the EU, 2019, p. 6). Several member states, for example the Netherlands and Sweden, already have effective mechanisms in place to ensure this collaboration; however, most member states allocate responsibility for cultural diplomacy wholly to their ministries of foreign affairs or, alternatively, their cultural institutes are managed by their ministries of culture or at arms' length from both ministries. The Framework for Action also calls for joint action by the member states, Commission, and the EEAS "to reach common EU positions in multilateral fora and networks and, where appropriate, to speak with one voice on issues having an impact on international cultural relations" and to "develop partnerships with international organisations and institutions that promote the role of culture and cultural heritage in bringing peace to conflict and post-conflict areas" (Council of the EU, 2019, p. 7). Finally, there is a very practical recommendation for joint action: "put particular effort into the implementation of common projects and joint actions in third countries based on a common strategic vision developed at local level by the Member States, their diplomatic and consular representations, their cultural institutes, EUNIC, EU delegations and local stakeholders; adequate frameworks and instruments should be developed for that purpose" (Council of the EU, 2019, p. 8). This is probably the most important paragraph in the Framework for Action; it embodies the state-driven 'cultural relations' approach: a 'bottom up' process of consultation and collaboration between EU and third country stakeholders leading to a common vision and upon which common projects can be designed and delivered.

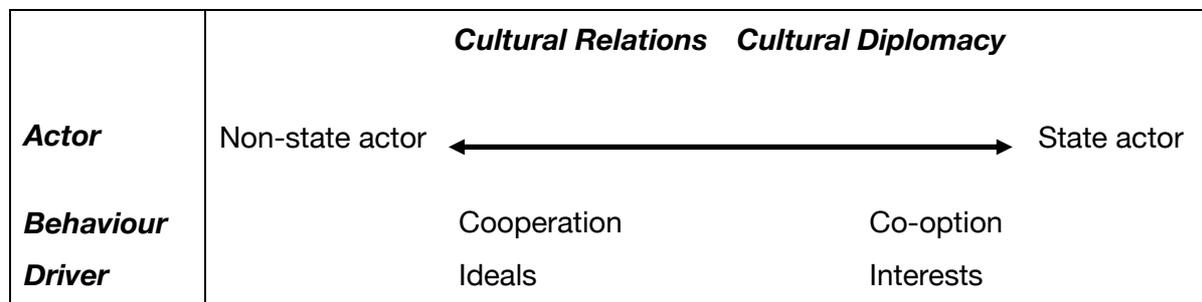
**Setting the boundaries of state-driven ‘cultural relations’:
The rise of International Cultural Relations and the tension between influence
and argumentation**

As a result of historical contingency, inter-institutional, and even political dynamics, state-driven ‘cultural relations’ as an innovative international practice have developed in Europe, first in the activities of the British Council and the Goethe Institut and then in the approach taken by the EU.

Now that the nature of the *explanandum* is clearer, we need to take a step further than simply recognising the coming into being of a new practice and move towards the construction of a theoretical framework. The first move in this direction is that of offering a well-defined conceptualisation. This endeavour is far from being an easy task if we were supposed to rely on the available body of literature on the role of culture in international relations. Indeed, we argue that scholarly approaches have consolidated around an actor-based understanding of practices that is unfit to fully apprehend the facets of contemporary international cultural practices. Whether adopting a dichotomous typology or a spectrum, scholars traditionally tend to group together practices of culture in IR on the basis of the presence or the absence of the state actor. Accordingly, two broad categories of scholars’ understanding of the role of culture in international relations can be identified, ‘cultural diplomacy’ and ‘cultural relations’ (see Figure 1).

We agree with Arndt when he claims that “cultural diplomacy can only be said to take place when formal diplomats, serving national governments, try to shape and channel this natural flow to advance national interests” (2006, p. xviii). Accordingly, cultural diplomacy designates an “essentially interest-driven governmental practice” (Isar et al., 2015, p. 365) and it is characterised by the agency of state actors, which try to foster their strategic interests by projecting well-defined representations by means of rhetoric and strategic communications. In this sense, cultural diplomacy is a pillar of public diplomacy (Cull, 2008) and a tool to mobilise soft power. Numerous scholars share this approach (see for example Haigh, 1974; Mitchell, 1986; Gienow-Hecht and Schumacher, 2004; Arndt, 2006; Mark, 2008; Chaubet and Martin, 2011; Clarke, 2016).

Figure 1. Actor-based typology of cultural practices in IR



Conversely, cultural relations are traditionally considered as “driven by ideals rather than interests” (Isar et al., 2015, p. 365) and to “grow naturally and organically” (Arndt, 2006, p. xviii) in a framework of cooperation. Non-state actors – non-governmental organisations, civil society actors, and even individuals – are considered as privileged actors of cultural

relations and the latter is seen to work better without government intervention. Practitioners of cultural relations are generally critical of the association between culture and soft power and of its inclusion in the 'toolbox' of the public and cultural diplomat; they consider that cultural relations should be far from the *longa manu* of the state.

Beyond these two main conceptual clusters and the actor-based approach they draw justification from, the practice identified through the cases of the British Council and the EU strategy – what we have called state-driven 'cultural relations' – calls for the introduction of a new conceptual cluster tracing the role of culture in state actors' external policies, in addition to the traditional one of cultural diplomacy and in juxtaposition to cultural relations.

We argue that the identification of such a cluster is possible if we introduce a new dimension to the differentiation of cultural practices in IR. Traditional categorisation efforts have been based mainly on the absence of the state actor (cultural relations) or its presence (cultural diplomacy). To better reflect current practices, conceptual efforts should soften the predominance of the *actor-based* understanding of culture in IR by integrating a process-based one. Therefore, we call for the introduction of a new dimension of differentiation based on the process underpinning the deployment of culture in international relations. Accordingly, actors can deal with culture in their international endeavours adopting two different approaches, namely the *soft power/strategic communications approach* and the *argumentative/participatory approach*.

According to the *soft power/strategic communications approach*, culture is a resource exploited by an actor active on the international stage to mobilise power and achieve strategic objectives. This approach relies on a definition of soft power as "the ability to affect others through the co-optive means of framing the agenda, persuading, and eliciting positive attraction in order to obtain preferred outcomes" (Nye, 2011a, p. 20). Agenda setting allows those who wield soft power to give their objective a frame of legitimacy that encourages the other party to spontaneously share the agenda in question. On the other hand, persuasion involves a proactive approach, based on manipulative arguments aimed at directly influencing the perception of the other party without using the threat of force or economic inducement. Finally, attraction plays on the relationship between the qualities actually possessed by the actor who practices it and the perception of the actor who is subject to it. The activation of these mechanisms relies on the exploitation of intangible resources such as institutions, ideas, values, culture, and the perceived legitimacy of policies (Nye, 2011a; 2011b). While soft power as a form of international action has originally been developed to account for governmental dynamics, a growing body of literature argues that its tools and practices are increasingly developed by the non-governmental (NGO) community (see for example, Nye, 2004; Betsill and Corell, 2007; Ivanchenko, 2016). Nye himself acknowledges that "today's information age has been marked by the growing role of non-governmental organizations [...] on the international stage", which "often enjoy considerable soft power" (Nye, 2004, n.d.). Therefore, as state actors do, also non-state actors can rely on cultural resources to alter public perceptions and achieve fixed preferences. In both cases, unilateral public interest communication strategies play the lion's share.

Conversely, the *argumentative/participatory approach* looks at culture not as a fixed resource and considers the practice of international cultural cooperation as a non-zero-sum game. According to Risse (2000), Habermas' theory of communicative action suggests that reasoned consensus can enable mutual understanding and therefore be a vehicle to jointly address issues of common concern via argumentation and the establishment of a common

normative framework. By engaging in deliberation, actors adopt a ‘truth-seeking’ behaviour that allows them to mutually challenge and explore each other’s validity claims and potentially develop a ‘common knowledge’ that is conducive to building trust. According to Risse (2000, p. 10), this argumentative effort potentially leads to the creation of a “common lifeworld” which “consists of a shared culture, a common system of norms and rules perceived as legitimate, and the social identity of actors being capable of communicating and acting”. Interacting in this ‘common lifeworld’, actors engaged in international cultural interaction can achieve stable and enduring cooperation and overcome collective action dilemmas. However, the success of this argumentative process comes with a cost. In order for the truth-seeking behaviour to achieve results, actors involved in the process have to abandon “fixed interests” and be “open to persuasion, challenges, and counterchallenges geared toward reaching a reasoned consensus” (Risse, 2000, p. 33). Such consensus is backed up by the construction of common norms and institutions that, in the long term, should induce a rule-guided behaviour modification in the actors involved in the process of cultural relations.

In addition to the actor-based dimension, a focus on the process would allow scholars to more clearly distinguish between different forms of cultural engagement in an international environment which is characterised by increasing phenomena of power diffusion (Nye, 2011b) – namely, “the progressive enlargement of the number of actors involved in the management of international relations” (Lamonica, 2019, p. 67) – and the consequent overlapping and merging of state and non-state actions and interests. Accordingly, the incorporation of a process-based approach to the analysis of cultural practices in IR does not jeopardise *per se* the validity of the actor-based approach. We do not see the two approaches as mutually exclusive but rather as part of a two-dimensional (biaxial) typology framework which incorporates the traditional conceptualisation of international cultural practices (see Table 1). Both state and non-state actors can adopt a strategic behaviour to achieve their fixed preferences thanks to the activation of soft power through cultural resources, practicing cultural (public) diplomacy and NGO diplomacy respectively. Alternatively, or in parallel to that, they can decide to adopt an argumentative behaviour with the goal to advance a reasoned consensus on issues of common concern with international counterparts, based on cooperation and mutual understanding rather than co-option, and dialogue rather than rhetoric. That is the case of cultural relations for non-state actors, and international cultural relations for state-actors.

As to the latter, at the crossroads of ‘state-actorness’ and argumentation lies the practice this paper is trying to systematise. As set out in Table 1, and following the Joint Communication and subsequent policy documents, we use the term ‘international cultural relations’ (ICR) to identify the corresponding concept to the practice of ‘state-driven cultural relations’ characterised by the argumentative/participatory process.

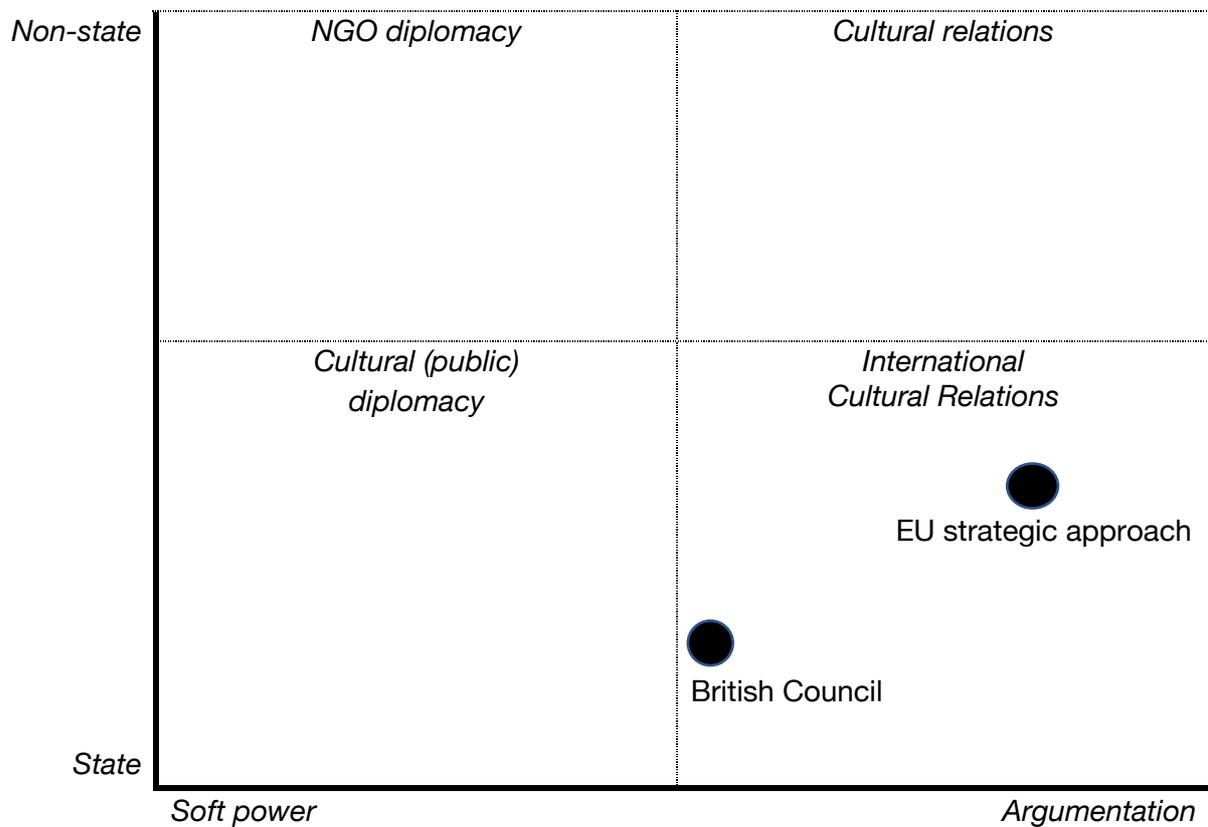
Table 1. A two-dimensional typology of cultural practices in IR

	State actor	Non-State actor
Soft power	Cultural (public) diplomacy	NGO diplomacy
Argumentation	International Cultural Relations	Cultural relations

By doing that, we take inspiration from the decision taken by the EC Joint Communication to call the EU strategic approach to the role of culture in IR as ‘international cultural relations’, to differentiate this approach from traditional cultural diplomacy. The axiological features of ICR are described in the next section.

This two-dimensional typology potentially allows us to position on a biaxial map a variety of actors active in international relations according both to their nature and the process they activate when they deal with culture (see Figure 2). This biaxial map may enable to study approaches to culture in IR separately, based on two geometric axes representing the actor-based (vertical axis) and the process-based (horizontal axis) spectra, respectively.

Figure 2. The position of international actors on a bi-dimensional cultural space. The cases of the British Council and the EU strategic approach to ICR.



As this is beyond the scope of this article, we limit this exercise to the two cases that we discussed, i.e. the British Council and the EU strategic approach to ICR. While both fall into the category of ICR, their positions on the vertical and horizontal axes differ. We have seen that the behaviour of the British Council is not solely based on argumentation and the constellation of values that is attached to it, for a degree of ambiguity is projected by the interference of the British government and the necessity to show a strategic behaviour and adopt the narrative of soft power. That is why it is positioned on the state-side of the vertical spectrum and close to the middle of the horizontal one. Conversely, the EU strategic approach has proven to be designed and somehow implemented according to a genuine argumentative approach – therefore it is placed on the right side – and with emphasis on

cooperation and empowerment of non-state stakeholders, which explains its upward position on the map.

The axioms of International Cultural Relations

According to our typology, ICR are practiced by state actors when they prefer argumentation over co-option. What does this mean? Acts of international cultural relations can be very different, but we argue that the activities of some state actors can be gathered into the same category on the basis of family resemblance¹; namely the fact that they have significant features in common. Therefore, they potentially realise reasonably common combinations of acts of international cultural cooperation. In the following paragraph, we offer a first, non-exhaustive list of six axioms that may help us further define the borders of ICR as a concept and state-driven cultural relations as a practice.

1. *'International cultural relations' are based on an argumentative approach to dialogue and cooperation in international relations.* The objective of international cultural relations is to foster international cooperation in support of common good and in a stable global context. To be effective, this cooperation has to be based on trust and mutuality. We argue that this can be achieved by nurturing a shared understanding between the actors involved through the deployment of argumentative and deliberative processes instead of insisting with the cheap talk models, rhetoric, and strategic communications characterising traditional cultural diplomacy as a subset of public diplomacy. This is aligned with Stuart MacDonald's suggestion to apply the normative framework of Jurgen Habermas's critical theory of communicative action (MacDonald, 2021), and in particular Risse's extension of the Habermasian concept to the field of cultural relations (Risse, 2000).
2. *International cultural relations are value laden.* According to relevant literature (Cummings, 2003; Rose and Wadham-Smith, 2004), and in line with the necessity to develop a common set of norms and institutions among involved actors, culture in international relations should work as a 'normative system'. The issue is to ascertain what such key values might be. The recent experiences of the British Council and of the EU point to the fact that ICR pivot around the intersection of two key values, trust and mutuality. Trust, which is "the core ethic of cultural relations", being both the ultimate goal and the keystone of the practice (Rose, 2019, p. 15), arises from open and flexible relationships and is a precondition for reaching cooperative solutions to dilemma situations. Mutuality, which is the engine of cultural relations, is not a process but rather a set of values. These values include mutual learning, co-creation, mutual understanding, which is not transactionality of a mutual benefit, reciprocity, inclusion, and empowerment (Rose and Wadham-Smith, 2004).

¹ The practices of the British Council, the Goethe Institut, and the EU can be understood as united by characteristics that give them a certain "family resemblance" (Wittgenstein and Anscombe, 1953, p. 31). Family resemblances are those "salient resemblances which are fairly common to, or distinctive of, the members of a kind, and which we often use to identify members of that kind" (Gert, 1995, p. 183).

3. *International cultural relations are highly relational, processual, and functional.* Relations between actors in the domain of culture generate a causal process that leads to the realisation of preferred outcomes. According to some scholars (see Baldwin et al., 2006), this implies that culture is processual and functional, in the sense that it can act to provide those who practice it with the means of control over other actors; moreover, it can serve to structure relationships with them (Lamonica, 2019). Different value subsets generated by different actors interact within a shared normative system. In accordance with Swidler's alternative analysis of culture (1986), international cultural relations see culture as a "toolkit" that can be used by actors not to identify "ends of action" but rather to refine "strategies of action" – i.e., "persistent ways of ordering action through time" (Swidler, 1986, p. 273). Therefore, reliance on culture is characterised by a variable geometry, which implies differing strategies within the same cultural framework. In line with Swidler's approach to the cultural explanation of action, ICR is declined differently ('strategies of action'). However, actors have to be consistent with the set of values ('toolkit') resulting from the construction of a shared understanding. In this regard, international cultural relations can work where there are not shared institutions or values, by helping actors to construct the common knowledge that is required to achieve fruitful deliberation. As this is a contextual approach, actors are allowed to act both strategically and discursively.
4. *International cultural relations as an argumentative process are practiced in the interest of the governmental actor but at arm's length from it.* Therefore, ICR can be considered as non-governmental insofar as they adopt a decentralised institutional approach (Arndt, 2006; Rose, 2019), wherein decentralisation is drawn from the level of operational independence, not funding itself. Indeed, there are two traditional approaches to states' management of external cultural policies, a centralised approach and a de-centralised one. On the one hand, the centralised approach requires the government of a country to oversee the entire process of cultural diplomacy – from the definition of the overall strategy to implementation and monitoring – usually through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. On the other hand, the de-centralised approach follows the 'arm's length principle' according to which semi-independent agencies endowed with operational independence but overseen by the government handle external cultural relations. This kind of international institutions, also due to their non-hierarchical and network-like approach, are conducive to the development of a normative framework allowing for argumentative cooperation. The UK has been a forerunner in developing a decentralised model based on a network of semi-independent arm's length governing bodies appointed to promote and implement international cultural policies. As to the EU, the member states have competency in culture and education; they also jealously guard their competency in diplomacy despite the creation of the European External Action Service after the Treaty of Lisbon. Such constraints have certainly influenced the recent EU policy on the role of culture in external relations, which is characterised by a loose governance, a reliance on decentralised and bottom-up initiatives, and a density of mostly informal interactions.
5. *International cultural relations are primarily concerned with cross-border and transnational 'people-to-people' interactions rather than State-to-people relations.* In this regard, this approach resembles the evolution of public diplomacy in the last two

decades, insofar the diffusion of power has resulted in an enlargement of the number of actors involved in public diplomacy, so much so that today its practice looks more like “a star that includes lines among governments, publics, societies, and nongovernmental organizations. [The] result is a new set of mixed coalitions of governmental, intergovernmental, and nongovernmental actors each using public diplomacy for its own goals” (Nye, 2011a, p. 100). Similarly, international cultural relations also involve supranational and intergovernmental organisations, as exemplified by the EU Strategic approach to international cultural relations. As we have seen, this is the sense in which the term has been used by the British Council and is currently used in the EU strategic approach adopted in 2016.

6. *International cultural relations build on a deep anthropological definition of culture.* Much of the difficulty in understanding culture is conceptual and semantic, and this complexity is made even more intricate by the functional ambiguity of many political and ideological agendas. Moreover, the fact that the concept of culture has been borrowed from different fields of study has meant that the definition of the concept itself is traditionally in flux (Inda and Rosaldo, 2008). As a consequence, there is no agreement on a shared definition of culture (Apte, 1994; Taras, Rowney and Steel, 2009; Spencer-Oatey, 2012; Matsumoto and Juang, 2013), so much so that Matsumoto and Juang (2013, p. 7) go so far as to suggest that “we must begin by acknowledging and admitting the breadth, scope, and enormity of culture”. If we look at institutional practice, UNESCO defines culture as “a set of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual, and emotional features of society or a social group, and that it encompasses, in addition to art and literature, lifestyles, ways of living together, value systems, traditions and beliefs” (UNESCO, 2001). In this sense, culture presents itself as a complex concept based on the multilevel interaction of artifacts, behaviours, beliefs, values, and basic assumptions (Schein, 1985). An individual belonging to a community acquires the aforementioned components through socialisation (see Hofstede, 1994; Lustig and Koester, 1999; Ferraro, 1998), which is why cultural practices are characterised by a high rate of gradual change in a framework of mutual diffusion (see Boas, 1962; Ferraro, 1998; Spencer-Oatey, 2012). All in all, the nature of culture is at least polysemous. Accordingly, international cultural relations take the complexity of culture as one of its axioms.

Conclusions

This paper acknowledges the coming into being of a new international practice, namely state-driven ‘cultural relations’, and consequently offers an update to the traditional categories depicting the role of culture in international relations. It does so by adding a new analytical dimension, based on the process, to the actor-based understanding of international cultural practices and by introducing a new conceptual category, namely international cultural relations.

As a result of historical contingency, inter-institutional and political dynamics, international cultural relations have developed in Europe, first in the activities of the British Council and the Goethe Institut and then in the approach taken by the EU. Their institutional practices,

and the narrative strings attached to them, allowed these actors to start developing a common knowledge on a specific mode of interaction in tackling commonly perceived problems. This allowed for the emergence of norms and institutions that are becoming standardised enough to serve as a template for a rule-guided behaviour. As a consequence, international cultural relations are no longer a wish but rather an expectation fully aligned with the recent growing recognition of the need to develop global dialogue and cooperation in the face of global challenges. Over the last two decades, other EU member states – and non-EU too (e.g., China and Russia) – have re-evaluated the role of culture in the conduct of their foreign policy and have very tentatively begun to move away from a ‘showcasing’ cultural diplomacy approach to one based upon the values of trust, mutuality and reciprocity.

At the same time, this role is in potential jeopardy because of the threatening dynamics of the current international environment. That is why it is time for academics, practitioners, and policy makers to share a robust conceptual framework. Academics will then be reassured enough to undertake a more theoretically informed analysis of the phenomenon; practitioners will benefit from conceptual clarification in terms of advocacy, monitoring and evaluation; and policy makers will be in a position to better appreciate the importance of the ‘why’ and ‘how’ as well as the ‘what’ of international cultural relations.

Taking a grounded-normative approach and distilling from institutional practices, we sketched what we think are the basic axioms of international cultural relations. If governmental actors wish to foster international cooperation in support of the common good and in a stable global context, they: (1) have to build from an argumentative approach to dialogue and cooperation in international relations with the goal to achieve shared consensus or at least informed disagreement in a trust-conducive and mutually beneficial setting; (2) have to see international cultural relations as practiced in the interest of the governmental actor but at arm’s length from it, and preferably empowering international institutions that allows for interactions in informal and network-like environments; (3) have to be primarily concerned with cross-border and transnational ‘people-to-people’ interactions rather than State-to-people relations. In this regard, international cultural relations can be seen as a sort of ‘democratic innovation’, for they test the waters for greater citizen participation in the governance of international relations.

With an eye on our bi-dimensional typology, we argue that this approach to the role of culture in IR is much better suited than traditional cultural diplomacy approaches to help governmental actors foster international cooperation. This is not a conservative but rather an evolutionary approach as far as it implies a strengthening of a renewed multilateral institutional framework in international relations at a time of increasing distrust, international retrenchment and domestic priorities. It is about what the world is ought to be without rejecting what the world actually is. Moreover, we argue that the adoption of a process-based differentiation to mitigate the preeminence of ‘actorness’ in determining the nature of cultural interactions has the potential to fill the gap between common interest and national interest, insofar the introduction of an argumentative and participatory approach to culture in IR enables the state to pursue both. For a state actor, moving from cultural diplomacy to international cultural relations is a matter of choice. It can decide to practice both at the same time, or privilege one over the other.

We don’t claim to be the first to acknowledge the confusion surrounding the role of cultural practices in IR, nor that our call to go beyond the association between culture in IR and states’ soft power is the first of its kind. Back in 2015, Isar opened the first special issue

on cultural diplomacy published by the *International Journal of Cultural Policy* by noting that “the work of cultural diplomacy, while initiated by governments, is capable of going beyond any partisan, national interest by fostering mutual understanding, which presumably is of common interest” (2015, p. 370). At the same time, Isar assumes that there is a tension between common interest and national strategic approaches to culture, and he glosses the opening of the special issue asking how cultural diplomacy can “be both in the national interest and go beyond the national interest” (2015, p. 370). We argue that our introduction of a more rigorous process-based differentiation has the potential to fill the gap between common interest and national interest, insofar as the adoption of an argumentative and participatory approach to culture in IR enables the state to pursue both interests in a participatory setting.

Finally, together with this first attempt to setting the conceptual boundaries of international cultural relations, we call for a stronger political and ethical engagement of a theory of international cultural relations with the world of practice(s) to set an ‘action research’ agenda which is (also) aimed at societal transformation towards a healthier international system where cultural diversity is a reality. The wish is that a practically informed theory will feed into a theoretically informed practice of cultural relations, thus not limiting the potential of self-generation in international relations to Thucydides’ heavy legacy (Allison, 2017) and allowing for the construction of a truly ‘common lifeworld’. Here again, practices can play a lion’s share insofar culture “is not only in people’s minds, discourse, and interactions; it is also in the very performance of practices” (Adler and Pouliot, 2011, p. 13).

Disclaimer

This working paper is based on data collected by the authors during their involvement in research projects dealing with the role of culture in international relations – for example CReW (2017-2019) and CIRCEA (2019-2022) – as well as in their capacity as cultural practitioners - Andrew Murray is the former Director of EUNIC Global. Direct and participant observation, together with semi-structured interviews and quasi-quantitative surveys undertaken in the last years, have been the main tools adopted in what certainly is a qualitative methodological approach.

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