A Brief Incursion in the Realm of Institutional Organization of the American Cultural Diplomacy from World War I to 1946

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Abstract

The institutional organization of the American cultural diplomacy from the end of the First World War and the full engagement of the United States in the Second World War was an experimental, reactive, and unsubstantial policy. Even though the idea of using culture or arts as diplomatic tools was rejected by many governmental officials, there were many personalities like President Roosevelt, who foresaw that the power of art and culture represents an important part of states' foreign policy. In fact, since the Cold War till now, cultural diplomacy has acquired special significance becoming an important instrument that operates among the other diplomatic methods.

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The researcher's task to pinpoint the beginnings of cultural diplomacy in the United States is difficult for mainly two reasons: firstly, the concept of *cultural diplomacy* is still in debate in the academic field at large, in terms of actors and instruments, products and objectives.

The scholarly literature proposes different definitions, ranging from a wide cover of all the above-mentioned elements to narrower ones, that contain the cultural actions of a nation inside the governmental organizations and processes.

American political scientist Milton C. Cummings explained the concept of "cultural diplomacy" as one that "*(…) refers to the exchange of ideas, information, art, and other aspects of culture among nations and their peoples in order to foster mutual understanding. But "cultural diplomacy" can also be more of a one-way street than a two-way exchange, as when one nation concentrates its efforts on promoting the national language, explaining its policies and point of view, or "telling its story" to the rest of the world*"[2]. Moreover, its practice is designed "*to strengthen relationships, enhance socio-cultural cooperation* [n.n and] *promote national interests (…)*", being used by "*the public sector, private sector or civil society*"[3]. British historian Nicholas J. Cull gave it an even wider spectrum, by defining cultural diplomacy "*as an actor's attempt to manage the international environment through making its cultural resources and achievements known overseas and/or facilitating cultural transmission abroad*"[4].

On the other hand, the narrower definitions of the *cultural diplomacy* concept focus on the idea that governments have the fundamental role in instrumenting it. In his book *The First Resort of Kings: American Cultural Diplomacy in the Twentieth Century*, Richard Arndt explains that

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[2] Milton C. Cummings, *Cultural Diplomacy and the United States Government: A Survey*, Washington, D. C., Centre for Arts and Culture, 2003 p.1.
[3] Institute for Cultural Diplomacy - USA, http://www.culturaldiplomacy.org/index.php?en_culturaldiplomacy)
[4] Nicholas J. Cull, *Public Diplomacy: Lessons from the Past*, Los Angeles, Figueroa Press, 2009, p. 19.

"*Cultural relations grow naturally and organically, without government intervention—the transactions of trade and tourism, student flows, communications, book circulation, migration, media access, intermarriage—millions of daily cross-cultural encounters. If that is correct, 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*"[5]. On the same line, Simon Mark defines *cultural diplomacy* as "*the deployment of a state's culture in support of its foreign policy goals or diplomacy*"[6].

Secondly, the specific relation between culture and government in the United States raises a particular set of challenges. Since the United States' inception, even when Presidents like Thomas Jefferson or Andrew Jackson confessed their belief in supporting the American culture (defined mainly as "art") and the government sporadically dared to venture into the artistic field (public art, architecture), the Congress excelled in reluctance when asked to spend public money on cultural endeavors.

In 1830, when James Smithson generously left more than half a million dollars to the federal government in order to create a national cultural center in Washington, D.C. (the now famous Smithsonian Institution), his decision stirred a strong debate in the US Congress not only about the appropriate use of the money, but also on the question whether the United States has a national culture to express as such or whether the regional American cultures deserve to be supported.

A change was made in the 20th century, during the New Deal; under very specific and traumatic economical and identity conditions, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt had the chance to set out federal programs and policies

[5] Richard Arndt, *The First Resort of Kings: American Cultural Diplomacy in the Twentieth Century*, Washington, D.C: Potomac Books Inc., 2006, p. xix.
[6] Simon Mark, *A Greater Role for Cultural Diplomacy*, The Hague, 'Clingendael' Netherlands Institute of International Relations, 2009, p. 7.

designed to help various categories of artists and to subsidize works of art in an attempt to not only protect the unemployed artists, but also to promote a sense of social cohesion through art. Even then, programs such as *Public Works of Art Project* or the later *Federal Art Project*, *Federal Theater Project, Federal Music Project* and so on were met with skepticism and the disturbing accusation of communist propaganda by the US Congress, the conservative public and the Administration's critics.

The term 'propaganda' - applied to the US government's cultural ventures – raised another question mark with regard to the relationship between art and power in America. When the United States entered World War I, the negative meaning of the word was so strong in the American public mind that President Wilson avoided its use and ordered, in April 1917, the creation of a *Committee on Public Information* under the executive direction of journalist George Creel:

"I hereby create a Committee on Public Information, to be composed of the Secretary of State, the Secretary of War, the Secretary of the Navy, and a civilian who shall be charged with the executive direction of the Committee. As Civilian Chairman of this Committee, I appoint Mr. George Creel. The Secretary of State, the Secretary of War, and the Secretary of the Navy are authorized each to detail an officer or officers to the work of the Committee."[7]

The Committee's purpose was to disseminate information about the war to the American people; yet very soon, the *CPI* was operating overseas in over a dozen of foreign countries in Europe, Latin America, and the Far East, using an impressive range of mass cultural instruments (newsprints, posters, radio, movies, even language education programs and library reading rooms) in order to influence the foreign public opinion and increase the international support for

[7] Woodrow Wilson, Executive Order 2594—Creating Committee on Public Information Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, The American Presidency Project, https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/275417

the United States. Domestically, the *'Creel Committee'* organized a large-scale-as-never-seen-before operation of propaganda and counter-propaganda that was both praised and demonized by various public figures. The accusations of censorship, misinformation or monopolistic control over battlefield news have resulted in Congressional hearings. The US Congress abruptly stopped all funding for the *Committee* after the Armistice and the first government organization developed to promote the United States image overseas ended its activities on January 1st, 1919. George Creel contested the notion that the *CPI* had anything to do with censorship, stating in his 1920 book *How We Advertised America* that

"*In no degree was the Committee an agency of censorship, a machinery of concealment or repression. [...] At no point did it seek or exercise authorities under those war laws that limited the freedom of speech and press. [...] it was a plain publicity proposition, a vast enterprise in salesmanship, the world's greatest adventures in advertising. [...] Our effort was educational and informative throughout, for we had such confidence in our case as to feel that no other argument was needed than the simple, straightforward presentation of the facts.*"[8]

Creel offered a similar explanation in his reports on the *CPI* activity:

"*At no point were our functions negative. We dealt in the positive, and our emphasis was ever on expression, not suppression. We fought indifference and disaffection in the United States and we fought falsehood abroad. We strove for the maintenance of our own morale by every process of stimulation; we sought the verdict of mankind by truth telling. We did not call it "propaganda" for that word, in German hands, had come to be associated with lies and corruptions. Our work was educational and informative only, for we had such confidence in our case as to feel that only fair presentation of its facts was needed*."[9]

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[8] George Creel, *How We Advertised America*, New York, Harper & Brothers, 1920, pp. 4–5.

[9] *Idem*, "Complete Report of the Chairman of the Committee on Public Information (1917, 1918, 1919)", Washington D.C., U.S. Government Printing Office, 1920, p. 1.

What is worth emphasizing is that the *CPI* was created as an independent agency of the government and it was highly distrusted by the Department of State officials. The distaste of the American public and American politicians for "propaganda" and the government usage of arts or any other form of cultural expression in foreign policy was reinforced in the 1920's by the Soviet Union's cultural activities abroad. Long before the American leaders fully understood the power of arts in foreign policy, the Soviets armed themselves with an ideologically-driven art called "social-realism" and with a very well subsidized instrument, the *All-Union Society for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries* (VOKS by its acronym) that was set up in 1925. Through its numerous branches overseas, *VOKS* functioned as an international propaganda organization, promoting the Soviet accomplishments through cultural instruments. In 1926, the *American Society for Cultural Relations with Russia* was established in New York, and it engaged in book exchange and promotion of specially designed "tours" of the Soviet Union for artists and intellectuals.

During the 1920's - a decade of great prosperity, pride and illusions for the American nation - the cultural diplomacy was left to private enterprises such as *The Institute of International Education* - established in 1919 and sponsored by the *Carnegie Endowment* - which covered expenses for some of the travels and exchanges between the U.S. and Latin American universities; another organization was the *American Library Association* (ALA), which by the 1930s set in place cultural programs that included visits, fellowships, library training, and exchange of publications. Moreover, in an era when the American government and the US Congress were reluctant or even hostile to be involved in supporting cultural diplomacy from the public purse, the private internationalism - as historian Ikira Arye noted - was thriving. The study of international affairs was promoted by new associations like the *Council on Foreign Relations*, the *Foreign Policy Association*, the *Foreign Affairs Forum*, the *Institute of Pacific Relations* or the

Foundation for the Advancement of the Social Sciences. American universities such as Tufts or Georgetown developed programs designed for scholars' and students' exchange, and educational resources with countries like Weimar Germany, France or China.

In the next decade, however, this course of events has changed. Firstly, the Great Economic Depression affected the funding of such private actions and the grants offered by the Carnegie Corporation, Guggenheim or Rockefeller Foundation either shrank or disappeared. Secondly, the international environment degraded and the US foreign policy makers started to perceive the threats posed by the aggressive cultural diplomacy of the totalitarian regimes, especially in the Western Hemisphere. Thirdly, after three years of economic downfall and political confusion, the new US President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, and, to some extent, the Congress (controlled in both Chambers by the Democrats) understood that both the crisis and the foreign threats are exceptional phenomena, to be dealt with out of the ordinary means. Fourth, as recent works on public diplomacy are pointing out, during this decade, the American foreign policy makers slowly began, for multiple reasons, to look for the "Americanization" or the spreading of American ideology, values and culture in order to protect and promote the United States foreign policy objectives.[10]

All these reasons seemed to play a part in the Roosevelt Administration' decision to establish the *Division of Cultural Relations* at the State Department on July 27th, 1938 - the first institutional step in employing culture as a foreign policy tool. It was a small response to what was perceived as a cultural offensive of the Nazi Germany in Latin America, five years after FDR proclaimed in his *Inaugural Address* his intentions to improve relations between the United States and the countries of the Western Hemisphere by political, economic and cultural means.

[10] Justin Hart, *Empire of Ideas: The Origins of Public Diplomacy and the Transformation of U.S. Foreign Policy*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2013, pp. 8-9.

The architects of the 'Good Neighbor Policy' and the 1938 decision were top diplomats, such as Secretary of State Cordell Hull, Assistant Secretary Sumner Welles, Laurence Duggan (former head of the Institute of International Education) and Franklin Delano Roosevelt himself. Professor of International Relations at Denver University Ben M. Cherrington was appointed Head of Division, a man who viewed cultural diplomacy in terms of international, educational and cultural exchanges rather than propaganda.

The Division worked with an advisory committee appointed by the Secretary of State comprising other important academics, presidents of the national research councils, and the director of the Institute of International Education. In order to oversee the exchanges and administered grants, an Inter-Departmental Committee for Scientific and Cultural Cooperation was also created.

The primary function of this new office was to coordinate any ongoing and new private initiatives in cultural diplomacy. As one government official, Mr. Messersmith, explained to the Congress, the *Division* would exist to "*assist the foundations and universities in this country*"[11] in carrying out their international - cultural activities. Taking these limitations into consideration, one can see the effort of State Department officials to sidestep possible congressional criticisms about costs and avoiding the negative tag of covert propaganda. Hence the *Division of Cultural Relations*, with its global aims, was understaffed, underfunded and over-supervised.

In 1938, a cultural agenda was developed by the *Division of Cultural Relations* after a series of conferences held in Washington, D.C. At these conferences, experts in the fields of education, art, publications, libraries, and

[11] *Second Deficiency Appropriation Bill for 1938: Hearings Before the Subcommittee of the Committee on Appropriations, House of Representatives, Seventy-fifth Congress, Third Session, on the Second Deficiency Appropriation Bill for 1938*, United States Congress House Committee on Appropriations, U.S. Government Printing Office, 1938, p. 656.

music met to discuss how to organize the Inter-American cultural relations. In most cases, the participants recommended an expansion of private cultural initiatives while the newly established *Division* would provide some overall guiding framework. The main projects envisioned the exchange of scholars, interchange of books and translations, exportation of motion pictures and radio broadcasts, and, although were viewed as marginal activities, the presentation of visual and performing arts.

On October 11th, 1939, 125 people - including publishers, artists, art critics, and museum professionals - attended the first Conference on Inter-American Relations in the Field of Art organized by the *Division of Cultural Relations.*

The Department of State seized the moment to emphasize "*the role of the Division of Cultural Relations as an agency to cooperate with private organizations engaged in the stimulation of cultural interchange*", presenting it mainly as "*a service rather than a directive agency*"[12].

The meeting was a formal opportunity for planning exhibitions of Latin American art financed by private institutions and for debating on "*what constituted truly representative art material from the United States*".[13] As a result and under the auspices of the State Department, exhibitions of paintings representing the art of Latin American countries, in a collaborative effort of American museums, the Pan American Union, and the Hispanic Foundation of the Library of Congress toured some American cities. But this cultural enterprise coordinated by the State Department paled if compared with the monumental artistic exhibition organized by private initiative. Around the same time, in 1939, the Museum of Modern Art from New York City started its own project to promote Latin American arts to the American public and in the spring of 1940 MoMA

[12] *Conference on Inter-American Relations in the Field of Art, Analysis and Digest of the Conference Proceedings*, Department of State, Washington, D. C., October 11-12, 1939. pp. 2-3, https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=mdp.39015073412747&view=1up&seq=5
[13] *Ibidem.*

opened a Mexican art exhibition entitled "*Twenty Centuries of Mexican Art*" which was exposed on three floors and the greater part of the Museum's sculpture garden and included almost 6000 art pieces. The President of MoMA – Nelson A. Rockefeller – told the press that it was "*the largest and most comprehensive exhibition of Mexican art ever assembled*"[14] and it definitely was. Antonio Castro-Leal, one of Mexico's foremost art critics wrote that "*For the first time in the history of art exhibitions there has now been brought together in one building an authoritative and systematic collection of Mexican art, from the archaic cultures to the most recent schools of painting*".[15] Of course, in all Museum's press releases there was no mention of the State Department, or the *Division.* Moreover, one may observe that even one of the most important cultural private institutions in the country, the Museum of Modern Art from New York City, was somehow reserved to promote American artists abroad.

The outbreak of the Second World War in September 1939 changed the entire world of American diplomacy. By no means a coincidence, in 1940, just weeks after the German victory over France, President Roosevelt established a new agency out of the State Department, in order to address the need for a more robust cultural diplomacy in Western Hemisphere - the *Office for the Coordination of Commercial and Cultural Relations between the American Republics*. The agency was to be headed by a coordinator for Commercial and Cultural Relations, namely Nelson A. Rockefeller - a Republican, an oil magnate like his grandfather, a passionate man of the Latin American art and, as he already demonstrated as president of the Museum of Modern Art, an excellent cultural manager.

In July 1941, through Executive Order 8840, President Roosevelt renamed this organization into the *Office of the Coordinator of Inter-American Affairs* (usually

[14] "Twenty Centuries Of Mexican Art opens At Museum Of Modern Art", *The Museum of Modern Art Press Release, Wednesday, May 15, 1940*, p. 1. https://assets.moma.org/momaorg/shared/pdfs/docs/press_archives/608/releases/MOMA_1940_0039_1940-05-11_40511-34.pdf

[15] *Ibidem.*

abbreviated OCIAA)[16]. Rockefeller engaged into a major effort destined to enhance the American cultural diplomacy toward the Central and South American republics. He developed the existing commercial and cultural projects in Latin America, established more offices and libraries, extended the network of binational centers and launched many new exchanges and lecture programs. But the major change was that under Rockefeller's command, a sort of "cultural tidal wave" (in the words of Michael Krenn)[17] from the United States engaged the Latin American public opinion. In less than two years and in a stark contrast with the cultural programs initiated in 1938, now having a sizeable budget of $ 3,5 million allocated from the President's Emergency Fund, Rockefeller and a plethora of his social and business relations plus the formidable team from the *OCIAA* sent thousands of American mass cultural products to the Southern neighbors; Hollywood movies (including Disney cartoons), radio music and newscasts, orchestral visits, publications like "En Guardia" (On Guard) in more than half a million copies reached millions of people south of Rio Grande.

American art also made its way to Latin America, in May 1941, when, with help from a consortium of New York City museums, a massive exhibit of 178 oils and 109 watercolors of some of the country's best known modern artists, travelled to 10 Latin American countries. This was the first major art project partially funded and fully organized by a United States government agency after the First World War. It is, however, ironical that it foreshadowed in many aspects the outcome of the ill-fated Advancing American Art exhibition organized by the State Department in 1947.

The plan for "Exposición de la Pintura Contemporánea Norteamericana" was conceived in December 1940 by the Advisory Committee on Art of the

[16] Franklin D. Roosevelt, *Executive Order 8840 Establishing the Office of Coordinator of Inter-American Affairs*. Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, The American Presidency Project https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/209811

[17] Michael L. Krenn *The History of United States Cultural Diplomacy: 1770 to the Present Day*, London, Bloomsbury Publishing, 2017, p. 59.

OCIAA. The Committee included experts such as the librarian of Congress (and future Assistant Secretary of State for Cultural and Public Affairs) Archibald MacLeish and William Benton - then vice president of the University of Chicago and later MacLeish's successor in his position in the State Department. After that, the chair of the advisory committee and vice-president of the Museum of Modern Art, John E. Abbott, asked the director of the OCIAA's Cultural Relations Program to consider this large-scale exhibit.

A step further was made at the beginning of 1941, when a consultant to the committee and director of the San Francisco Museum of Art visited the capitals of ten Latin American countries in order to test the desirability of such project and returned reporting that the idea was considered "*highly desirable by most of the authorities, artists, educators, and laymen interested in the art of the various South American republics*".[18]

In the next step, another committee of private art experts was appointed to select paintings which were given on loan by private individuals, galleries, and museums. Thus were selected the works of artists such as John Sloan, William J. Glackens, Robert Henri, George Luks, Maurice Prendergast, George Bellows, Walt Kuhn, Reginald Marsh, William Gropper, Georgia O'Keeffe, and Arshile Gorky, among others, with the obvious intention to be as comprehensive as possible.

Before circulating in the selected locations, the exhibits were shown in April, 1941 at the Metropolitan Museum in New York City and received generous reviews; even the New York Times appreciated that the "*contemporary aspect is stressed*"[19].

[18] *Report on the Exposición de pintura contemporánea norteamericana, 1941*, Thomas J. Watson Library Digital Collections, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, p. 2, https://libmma.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/p15324coll10/id/155345

[19] "Latin America To See Exhibits Of U.S. Art", *The New York Times,* Saturday, April 12, 1941, p. 18.

After that final test, the exhibitions were unveiled to the Latin American public from May to December 1941, the tours being accompanied by museums art officials, 30.000 catalogs and fifty-three complementary art books for the library of the country's choice. The impact of these simultaneous exhibits was notable. They were displayed for one month in each location and were viewed by more than 218,000 people in ten capitals of the Latin American republics.[20]

In 1941, the Department of State clipped Rockefeller's wings by pressuring President Roosevelt into issuing an order that would oblige the *OCIAA* to inform the Department on its activities and that it would also seek the Department's approval before initiating any new programs. Many of its cultural programs ender after Pearl Harbor as the governmental effort – the *war effort* – now had to be redirected[21].

By 1943, nearly all of the OCIAA's cultural programs were transferred to the Division of Cultural Relations. The work continued throughout the war. In 1944, Rockefeller moved to the Department of State as Assistant Secretary for the Latin American affairs, leaving his friend and architect Wallace Harrison as the director of *OIAA*. Under Harrison's leadership, the *OIAA* also became involved in health issues and nutrition, an area that had President Roosevelt's blessing as the economic and social conditions in the Latin American Republics were becoming dire[22].

The Office of Inter-American Affairs' existence was, however, short-lived. By the end of the war, many of its cultural programs were either transferred to the Division of Cultural Relations within the Department of State or were terminated. In May 1946, *OIAA* ceased its activity.

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[20] *Report on the Exposición ….* p. 1.

[21] United States. Office of Inter-American Affairs, *History of the Office of the Coordinator of Inter-American Affairs,* Washington, D.C., 1947, U.S. Government Printing Office, p. 9 https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=mdp.39015014125036&view=1up&seq=9

[22] *Ibidem.*

If the term had been coined during those days, the *OIAA* would surely have identified its work with the concept of 'public diplomacy'. The largest portion of its programs belonged to 'cultural diplomacy' while others involved coordination in various fields – education, agriculture, commercial and economic etc. Rockefeller managed an agency whose mission was to gain Latin Americans' hearts and minds over the United States and to prevent the region's fall under Nazi propaganda. He envisaged programs that focused on promoting the American performing arts and carried them out with help from both private citizens and institutions to which he was well-connected and public institutions or governmental agencies. In this regard, the *OIAA* established multiple connections with the American cultural and business elite that proved to be fruitful for its operating and in advancing the US interests in Latin America. Moreover, the OIAA promoted the idea that the American Republics were united by sharing the same geography and destiny in the Western Hemisphere[23].

In a very brief conclusion, the institutional organization of the American cultural diplomacy from the end of the First World War and the full engagement of the United States in the Second World War was, in our opinion, experimental, reactive and unsubstantial. Even the idea of using culture or arts as diplomatic tools was rejected by many governmental officials, mainly within the State Department, and members of Congress alike. But, the interwar years were dominated by the European ideological confrontations and the United States was dragged into the cultural competition with the other Great Powers of that time.

President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, Cordell Hull, Sumner Welles, Laurence Duggan, Ben M. Cherrington, Nelson Rockefeller were among the first to innovate within the traditional world of American diplomacy, experimenting

[23] An in-depth overview of the ideological and practical reason behind the *OIAA* activities can be found in Gisela Cramer, Ursula Prutsch, "Nelson A. Rockefeller's Office of Inter-American Affairs and the Quest for Pan-American Unity: An Introductory Essay" in Gisela Cramer, Ursula Prutsch (eds.), *¡Américas unidas! : Nelson A. Rockefeller's Office of Inter-American Affairs (1940-46)*, Madrid, Frankfurt, Iberoamericana Vervuert, 2012, pp. 15-52.

the use of cultural diplomacy. The reactive dimension of these efforts is obvious and the projection of American arts in the world (starting with the neighboring Latin America) is strongly related with the rise of international tensions and the expansion of the ideological and cultural messages of the totalitarian regimes. And still, until the entry of the United States in the Second World War, the institutionalized efforts to build a proper and effective American cultural diplomacy were lacking consistency.

Those projects were seen as costly, improper and insignificant in relation to the extraordinary challenges imposed by the new dynamics of the international environment in the 1940's.

During the Second World War, the American culture was also engaged by the government in order to mobilize the American people and to explain to the domestic and foreign audience the reasons behind the tremendous war effort of the United States.