The International Conference on Cultural Diplomacy & the UN

New York & Washington, D.C., February 21st – 24th 2012

Margarita Alexandra Coppi Agostinelli

Cultural diplomacy and the concept of the *Other*

The question of identity is directly related to international relations, specifically to cultural diplomacy. According to the Institute of Cultural Diplomacy, cultural diplomacy may be defined as "the exchange of ideas, information, values, systems, traditions, beliefs and other aspects of culture, with the intention of fostering mutual understanding." Indeed, every culture is a system of behaviors and attitudes that shape and justify the nature of collective and individual identity. But what is identity then? Stuart Hall, in his article *Who needs identity* (1996), claims that identity can be constructed through the "recognition that it is only to the *Other*, the relation to what it is not, to what it lacks…" (Derrida, 1981; Laclau, 1990; Butler, 1993, p. 17). In order to explain the relationship between cultural diplomacy and identity, the meaning of the *Other,* as a key concept of identity, will be clarified.

The role of cultural diplomacy

Rather than being defined as a secondary discipline dependent on politics, cultural diplomacy can be explained as a phenomenon that provides "the operating context for politics" (Bound et al., 2007, p.20). Currently, cultural diplomacy has been used to contribute to nation-building and as a tool in public diplomacy. In fact, culture can reach a large number of people and can also be used as a political instrument in different ways, such as unofficial political relationship-building and as a tool for renegotiating relationships in changing times (and in this case, culture is defined as "soft power"). According to Edgard Telles Ribeiro, the Brazilian Ambassador to Thailand, cultural diplomacy is "nothing more, nothing less, than cultural relations put at the service

of foreign policy" (Telles Ribeiro, 2008, p. 3). Regarding cultural diplomacy, he also adds that "not only does it pursue its own objectives (which is to promote one's culture in another country), but it also helps, indirectly, to create a favorable atmosphere which often paves the way for other priorities of a bilateral agenda, including commercial or political ones" (Telles Ribeiro, 2008, p. 5). But in order to create a strong cultural diplomacy community, every country needs to define its own identity by also identifying its own diversity, what is different, which basically leads to the concept of the *Other*.

The Concept of the *Other*

The notion of the *Other* has always been an important topic examined by philosophers, anthropologists, and ethnologists. Throughout the years, the *Other* has been described as the quintessence of another individual who was different from the inner self (Sarukkai, 1997). But the recognition of the *Other* has also meant its contact/relationship with the self. One of the most enriching contributions to the understanding of the *Other* is the famous work of the philosopher Tzvetan Todorov, *The Conquest of America* published in 1982 (Todorov, 1982). This book not only offers a new perspective on the discovery of the *New World*, but also describes the exploration of the native, as underscored in the study's subtitle *The Question of the Other*, its recognition, denial, and final understanding.

Rather than discussing just the arrival and conquest of the Spanish army on the Aztec Empire, the book portrays the first encounter of two different cultures characterized by opposite religious beliefs, traditions, and attitudes. The discovery of the *Other* is described throughout the book following a chronological order that matches the phases of this encounter by the titles of its chapters: Discovery, Conquest, Love, and Knowledge.

When the conquistadores arrived in the *New World* they found their *Other*selves; this unexpected discovery made them realize about the possible presence of other human beings, physically similar and different, speaking another language, and using distinct signs. Despite

moments of surprise and curiosity, the sense of greed that pushed them to places never discovered before led them to fight against the *Other* and defeat it. "The feeling of superiority" (Todorov, 1982, p. 38) pervades the conquistadores, who, after having recognized the alterity of the *Other* decide to subjugate it as a way to show their power, and authority. After the time of the occupation, the conquistadores start to approach the *Other*, appreciate the differences, and reduce all the superiority/inferiority barriers. By knowing the *Other*'s culture, assimilating its diversity, and absorbing new perspectives, the conquistadores understood that "equality is no longer bought at the price of identity" (Todorov, 1982, p. 190). Thus, the discovery of America meant the discovery of the *Other* in relation to the self; the acceptance of the alterity of the *Other* as a way to acquire knowledge of the personal individuality.

Before the publication of Todorov's book, other anthropologists and ethnologists had already discussed the topic of the *Other*. Two of them decided to have an experience on the ground; in fact, they decided to spend a period of time with tribal peoples in order to extrapolate the reality of the *Other*. The experiences they had were described in *The Argonauts of the Western Pacific* by Bronislaw Malinowski in 1922, and *Coming of Age in Samoa* by Margaret Mead in 1928.

Malinowski's work can be considered as one of the most revealing studies of ethnology due to its profound research strengthened by personal observations. In order to discover the *Other*, in the course of three expeditions, the anthropologist lived in the archipelago of Trobriand Island for almost two years with the tribal peoples, the Kula. Speaking their language, he was able to learn and understand their behaviors, traditions, folklore, ceremonials, and beliefs (Malinowski, 1922). Throughout his book and his experience, he recalls examples from empirical sciences and methodology.

While the first chapters of the book detail explanations related to methodology, objectives of the study, and geographical descriptions of the places under observation; its other chapters describe the practical daily life on the island, customs, activities, technical skills, and mythology of native peoples. Through these descriptions supported by personal observation and involvement, the

psychological behaviors and attitudes of the tribal peoples acquire a familiar scale, a human intensity.

The last chapter of the book focuses on an analysis of Malinowski's findings based on his research detailing his knowledge and understanding of the tribal peoples. Having experienced their "native perspective" (Malinowski, 1922, p. 516), the anthropologist affirms that the concept of alterity can be revealed and eradicated only after acquiring the same cultural values and criteria of the other society. Moreover, only by understanding the *Other* can all of humankind be understood. In contrast to this functionalist anthropology is the personal observation and work of Margaret Mead, *Coming of Age in Samoa*, which was published in 1928.

Margaret Mead, a twenty-year old anthropology student at Columbia University, decided to conduct field research in Samoa, where she could delve deeper into the *Other*, and its life. Without any knowledge of the language, she followed the lives of some young girls entering in the adulthood (Freeman, 1983). Her study focused specifically on the personality of these girls, their attitudes and behavior toward their sexuality. Throughout the book, the lives of the Samoan girls are described as uninhibited, extrovert, and more mature. The research conducted by Mead was a comparative work; in fact she wanted to compare the lives of adolescent girls in Samoa with young girls living in the United States. Although both groups of girls faced the same problems of adolescence, their approach was different (Mead, 1928). Mead found that while Samoan girls were free and extroverted, American girls tended to be more discrete.
The first chapters of Mead's book are dedicated to daily life in Samoa, education for girls, family households, activities, and leisure; while the last two chapters focus on education, and educational challenges.

According to Mead, the major difference between the young girls of the two different countries is the notion of education; in her book, it is defined as the question of nurture versus nature. In fact, the author underscores the different approaches that girls have towards life depending on cultural factors. In her opinion, primitive peoples live in a simpler civilization that

provides them with more freedom and less distress. Finally, the author describes the *Other* as individual similar but different based on cultural dissimilarities (Mead, 1928).

In contrast to this cultural component of Mead, defined by Derek Freeman as *cultural determinism* (Freeman, 1983), the anthropologist Eugene Pittard offers another contribution to the meaning and understanding of the *Other*. In 1926, in his book, *Race and History* (Pittard, 1926), he analyzes different countries focusing on the notions of race, and "geographical environment" (Berr, 1926). In his book, Pittard also offers explanations for migration, geographical concentrations, and invasions.

The first chapters of Pittard's book focus on general concepts of race and history, and how these factors determine the evolution of the humankind. Then, the anthropologist classifies races based on languages, and geographical settlements. According to Berr, "human groupings" (Berr, 1926, p. XX) are listed along to their complexity, and environment is a factor changing through times, in fact "environment is modified but slowly and relatively, above all under the action of human groups --- in historic times." (Berr, 1926, p. XIX).

In order to explain the purpose of his research, Pittard offers his definition of race as "collection of like individuals of the same blood sprung from the same stock" (Pittard, 1926, p. 3). Thus, the description of the *Other* acquires other dimensions: the racial and the environmental factors. These variables affect the distinction of the *Otherness*, its diversity, and exoticism. Finally, Pittard recognizes the important contributions that the study of anthropology can offer to the fields of geography, economics, and sociology; moreover, he acknowledges the relationships among these research areas in order to better understand the reality of the *Other*.

In sum, anthropologists and ethnologists have widely discussed the topic of identity through the concept of the *Other* contributing to the introduction of diverse perspectives, and variables. In short, the *Other* has to be understood (Todorov, Malinowski), together with its culture (Mead) and race (Pittard).

The importance of culture and national identity has been perceived also by most of the emerging powers that are planning to use cultural diplomacy in their external relations and as a tool in their foreign policy. An example can be the uprising role of Brazil in the global arena.

Identity and cultural diplomacy

Brazil has become one of the most powerful emerging countries worldwide. This progress has been achieved over the years thanks to economic and social reforms, financial policies, and savvy foreign investments. Brazil has been one of the last countries affected by the global financial crisis in 2008-2009, and its growing economic market has succeeded to emerge from the inflation quite promptly (Roett, 2010).

Moreover, Brazil has always been able to react, overcome problems, and adapt itself to new events and challenges. In order to be the world's fifth largest economy by 2016, as predicted by former President Lula, the country is formulating new approaches to foreign policy. But, according to Clearly (1999), first of all, the country must recognize the value of its unique culture and needs a clear understanding of who it is.

The identity of Brazil is a topic of constant discussion that converged inevitably in the notions of race mixture, hybridism, and national culture. In fact, although the Brazilian independence was declared in 1822, a Brazilian country was not fully recognized and also the concept of Brasilidade (Brazilianness) has been much researched without coming to a precise interpretation (Nava, & Lauerhass, 2006).

Despite the discrimination of specific social and racial classes (Daniel, 2006), the Brazilian anthropologist Gilberto Freyre coined a term *Racial democracy* to describe race relations in Brazil, underscoring the multicultural identity of the country. In his opinion, inter-relations between black and white in Brazil have been characterized by conditions of social equality, harmonious comprehension, and coexistence. Although this perception has infused Brazilian natives with a sense of pride and nationalism, the country still has to solve problems of racial intolerance, injustice,

and poverty. Moreover, based on Freyre's assumption of a Brazilian multi-cultural and equalitarian country, all Brazilians have to discover and define their own identity as a way to be included in the real society, and create international dialogue and cooperation, mainly through the action of cultural diplomacy.

As Margaret Mead emphasized the importance of culture and how educational attainment can contribute to the creation of identity; culture is a fundamental component of the community, an essential feature that characterizes society. According to the UNESCO document, *Mexico City Declaration on Cultural Policies* (1982), culture "includes not only the arts and letters, but also modes of life, the fundamental rights of the human being, value systems, traditions and beliefs; that it is culture that gives man the ability to reflect upon himself…It is through culture that man expresses himself, becomes aware of himself, recognizes his incompleteness, questions his own achievements, seeks untiringly for new meanings and creates works through which he transcends his limitations."

Culture provides human beings with a sense of identity, cultural belonging, and a bond between the individual and the society. Every culture has distinct facets and reflects many aspects and features of the community itself. According to the anthropologist Edward Hall, there are two different kinds of communication styles that can represent cultural differences between societies (Hall, 1976). "High context" and "low context" cultures are labels that emphasize the level of personal interaction and identity. Although every individual generally uses both of the communication contexts depending on the occasions and circumstances, more or less implied meanings of words might be used.

High-context cultures are usually common in eastern countries where people generally use less explicit communication, but put more emphasis on nonverbal elements, such as voice tone, facial expressions, and gestures. In fact, "most of the information is either in the physical context or initialized in the person" (Hall, 1976, p. 91). In high-context cultures, thinking is deductive and proceeds from general to specific. In addition, high-context cultures are characterized by a strong

sense of identity, tradition and history. Finally, in high-context cultures, time is flexible and the process is more important than the product.

By contrast, low-context cultures are defined by the mass of information explicitly used. Communication is of short duration and accessible; thus, emphasis is placed on the importance on the verbal communication rather than on body language. In terms of interpersonal relationships, low-context cultures tend to have fragile bonds with people and values; in low-context cultures, people prefer to organize their time precisely and focus on the product.

In short, according to Porter and Samovar (1994), in order to understand differences and similarities of cultures, the levels of communications should be analyzed alongside their concept of identity.

But, identity can also be shaped by participating in cultural diverse societies; this social and political participation was defined by the United Nations' 1948 *Universal Declaration of Human Rights,* Article 27 that states that: 'Everyone has the right freely to participate in the cultural life of the community, to enjoy the arts, and to share in scientific advancement and its benefits.'

Based on this assumption, culture acquires a new meaning that has been introduced by two sociologists, Frank J. Lechner and John Boli. In their theory of *World Culture*, culture is a major determinant of how people perceive each other and negotiate differences. In this regard, opportunities for global contact and exchange are increasing as never before, and because of those contacts, culture itself is changing. No longer can we think of relatively static cultures; instead, cultures are meeting, mixing, and transforming society.

In the text *World Culture: Origins and Consequences* (Lechner & Boli, 2005), the sociologists explore the growing importance of the international development profession and the creation of the international comparative education discipline. In terms of the history of international comparative education, the text points out that American and foreign educators went to visit Prussian schools, and representatives of the Meiji reform period travelled to Europe and United States in the 18th century. These initial contacts and relationships (diplomatic and cultural) between

countries with different values and traditions can be defined not only as the first examples of globalization, but also as ways to learn and become enriched.

According to Lechner and Boli, through globalization and cultural relationships among countries, identities change, new interests are pursued, and new issues arise. In addition, over the years, the world has become more unified, and it gained a whole dimension. This cultural globalization had a profound impact on the ways in which nations construct and project their national identities. In fact, cultural agreements and traditions can foster the notion of local community and give importance to diversity. Cultural, religious and ethnic factors now play a larger part in defining our sense of self and community.

In sum, according to Hall (1996), identity is not only important for its political aspect, but also for its foundation of culture and representation of the individual and the society. In fact, identity, the definition of the *Other* and culture are connected and contribute to the explanation of a specific topic in international relations, cultural diplomacy. According to Hall (1976): "… The most important psychological aspect of culture - the bridge between culture and personality – is the identification process. This process…is most certainly a major impediment to cross-cultural understanding…" (Hall, 1976, p. 240). In other words, by discovering and appreciating the *Other*, people can recognize culture as a tool for fostering mutual understanding, establishing relationships between countries, and promoting social cohesion.

Bibliography

Berr, H. (1926). Introduction to Race and History in Pittard, E., *Race and History*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.

Bound, K., Briggs, R., Holden, J., & Jones, S. (2007). *Cultural diplomacy*. Demos.

Butler, J. (1993). *Bodies that matter*. London: Routledge.

Clearly, D. (1999). *Race, nationalism and social theory in Brazil: rethinking Gilberto Freyre*. David Rockefeller Center for Latin American Studies Harvard University.

Daniel, G.R. (2006). *Race and Multiraciality In Brazil and the United States – Converging Paths?* The Pennsylvania State University Press.

Derrida, J. (1981). *Positions.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Freeman, D. (1983). *Margaret Mead and Samoa: The Making and Unmaking of an Anthropological Myth.* Harvard university Press.

Hall, E.T. (1976). *Beyond Culture,* New York: Doubleday.

Hall, S. (1996). Who needs identity? in Hall, S. and du Gay, P. (eds), *Questions of Cultural Identity,* Sage Publications, London.

Institute Cultural Diplomacy. *Cultural Diplomacy News.* Retrieved February 7, 2012 from http://cdnews1.wordpress.com/about-5/about-cultural-diplomacy/

Laclau, E. (1990). *New reflections on the revolution of our time.* London: Verso.

Lechner, F.J., & Boli, J. (2005). *World Culture: Origins and Consequences*. Blackwell Publishing

Malinowski, B. (1922). *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* . Waveland Press.

Mead, M. (1928). *Coming of Age in Samoa*. Blue Ribbon Books.

Nava, C. & Lauerhass Jr, L. (2006). *Brazil in the making. Facets of national identity.* Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc.

Pittard, E. (1926). *Race and History.* New York: Alfred A. Knopf.

Porter, R.E., & Samovar, L.A.. (1994). An introduction to intercultural communication. In L.A. Samovar & R.E. Porter (Eds.)., *Intercultural communication: A reader*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.

Roett, R. (2010). *The New Brazil*. Washington D.C.: The Brookings Institute.

Sarukkai, S. (1997). *Economic and Political Weekly, (32)* 24, p. 1406-1409.

Telles Ribeiro, E. (2008). *Cultural diplomacy: an instrument of foreign policy.* SIFA Ambassador Talks Program. Bangkok.

Todorov, T. (1999). *The conquest of America*. *The question of the Other*. University of Oklahoma Press.

U N E S C O. (1982). *Mexico City Declaration on Cultural Policies*. World Conference on Cultural Policies.

United Nations. (1948). Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Retrieved February 7, 2012 from http://www.udhr.org/UDHR/udhr.HTM

Cultural diplomacy plays a crucial role in building relations among states in contemporary international relations, as it might serve as an effective instrument in supporting national foreign policy objectives or a constructive channel at times of political difficulty. According to the American scholar Milton Cummings, it can be defined as "the exchange of ideas, information On the other hand, at times of tension, when formal diplomatic negotiations are incapable, culture can 'keep doors open' until the relations improve. Public and Cultural Diplomacy. Total: EUR 18 150 000 EC contribution: EUR 16 800 000 (Procurement and indirect management: 100%; Grants: 75-80%) Other contributions: EUR 1 350 000 (Grants: 20%) 36 months – January 2020. Direct management through: - Grants. Subsidiarity and complementarity with other interventions in the field of (or related to) public diplomacy at country and global levels will be ensured by the relevant EU Delegations and by the Commission (the Service for Foreign Policy Instruments - FPI). One of the objectives of the PI MIP under public diplomacy is promoting the EU as a major and reliable partner in supporting human rights, democracy, good governance, the rule of law and a rules-based global and multilateral order. 6.