

# Transatlantic Cultural Diplomacy

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## Abstract

This chapter grapples with the question of whether the EU can project a coherent image to the outside world through public diplomacy given its significant cultural diversity. Has this been an impossible task or has the EU over time managed to create successful and legitimate ways of augmenting its soft power through the export of its cultural products? To shed light on this issue, I first consider the United States as the target audience for European cultural products, and evaluate successes and failures on a practical level. To what extent and why are Americans aware of European cultures? Second, I compare American public diplomacy approaches to European ones. Given that both the EU and US have high-levels of cultural diversity, I conclude by drawing out the lessons and drawbacks of adopting an American approach to public diplomacy, especially in light of the changing geo-political landscape.

## Introduction

Public diplomacy is typically defined as how a nation's government or society projects itself to external audiences in ways that aim to improve these foreign publics' perception of that nation.<sup>1</sup> Europeans can boast a long list of public diplomacy initiatives centered on cultural engagement at the European, national, and local levels. These cultural initiatives include music festivals, film weeks, food tastings, education fairs, and so on.<sup>2</sup> Through various media venues, there are also radio and TV talk shows, websites, policy papers and other publications that showcase debates, discussions, and even quizzes about what it means to be Euro-

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1 Mai'a K. Davis Cross and Jan Melissen (eds), *European Public Diplomacy: Soft Power at Work*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013.

2 European Commission, "A Glance at EU Public Diplomacy at Work," Brussels: European Communities, 2007.

pean in terms of both culture and identity. At the elite level, expert visits, training programs, information days, media trips, educational exchanges, and other events are common. This clear commitment to the cultural dimension of public diplomacy is certainly a result of the high level of awareness that EU institutions and member states have of the importance of foreign publics' perceptions of Europe.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, foreign public opinion is absolutely central to achieving Europe's foreign policy goals from trade to energy to security.<sup>4</sup>

The European Parliament advocates defining European culture as broadly as possible, but with specific and coherent strategies of promoting it to external audiences.<sup>5</sup> In particular, the Parliament recognizes the connection between culture and foreign policy, emphasizing the importance of culture's relationship to human rights. It stresses the important role of the fledgling European External Action Service (EEAS) in being able to convey cultural messages to foreign publics. And it calls for the EEAS to focus on sharing literature, film, music, and heritage to build bridges with foreign publics, as well as to foster best practices, democratization, and mutual understanding. Indeed, members of the European Parliament see trust building with foreign publics as intimately linked to cultural diplomacy.

Similarly, the European Commission sees culture as the cornerstone of human development.<sup>6</sup> Its research into the role of culture in diplomacy shows increasing demand for cultural products. The Commission finds that given the growth in 21<sup>st</sup> century communication tools, "creative entrepreneurs" have the potential to truly augment Europe's soft power, defined as attractive or co-optive power.<sup>7</sup> According to the Commission, the EU's influence, both internally and externally, is closely tied to its diverse culture. Internally, mutual exchange of culture within Europe promotes increased creativity, which enhances economic growth, jobs, innovation, enrichment, and lifelong learning. Externally, it promotes peace, intercultural dialogue, and conflict prevention – all major goals of EU foreign policy.

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3 Emma Basker, "EU Public Diplomacy," in Javier Noya (ed.), *The Present and Future of Public Diplomacy: A European Perspective. The 2006 Madrid Conference on Public Diplomacy* (Madrid: Elcano, 2006).

4 Committee on Culture and Education, European Parliament, "Draft Report on the cultural dimensions of the EU's External Relations," November 29, 2010.

5 Committee on Culture and Education, European Parliament, "Draft Report on the cultural dimensions of the EU's External Relations," November 29, 2010.

6 European Commission, "A Glance at EU Public Diplomacy at Work," Brussels: European Communities, 2007.

7 For more on European soft power, see Mai'a K. Davis Cross (2011) "Europe, A Smart Power," *International Politics* 48(6), pp. 691-706.

Member states have long engaged in robust approaches to their own national and sub-national public diplomacy.<sup>8</sup> But both the European Parliament and Commission understand that Europe's culture may be most influential when disseminated in a collaborative fashion, (i. e. at the European level), even though it is internally highly diverse. Collaboration in European cultural outreach can be achieved in such a way that cultural practitioners are able to come together in a forum for dialogue, and identify key stakeholders. In other words, there is a strategic dimension to culture as part of an overall European public diplomacy approach.

At the same time, it is undeniable that intra-European cultural diversity makes it challenging to project a coherent image of Europe to external audiences. This is where a comparison to the US might be valuable. It is worth noting that few *individual* countries have a singular culture or identity, even within Europe. The US, for example, is at least as internally diverse culturally as Europe with its multiple ethnicities, vastly different geographic landscapes, and spectrum of indigenous cultures. Yet, the US still manages to project a coherent and quite tangible image that is recognizable around the world. This chapter will first elaborate upon how American audiences perceive European culture, as an example of a key target audience for European cultural diplomacy, and then compare the US to Europe in terms of how well the two actors project their cultural identities abroad. Finally, I will conclude with some lessons for the future of European public diplomacy.

### **The US: An Important Target Audience for Europe**

The transatlantic relationship is often described as the most important and enduring alliance in the international system. This is no more obviously true than when we consider the historical context of the post-World War II period in which there was widespread recognition of the United States' role in supporting Europe through Marshall Aid, enabling the reconstruction and eventual establishment of a united Europe. The US was the first country to recognize the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC), and the first to establish diplomatic representation towards this fledgling union. In turn, the European delegation to the US was

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8 For a full account of member states' individual public diplomacy strategies, see: Philip Fiske de Gouveia, with Hester Plumidge, "European Infopolitik: Developing EU Public Diplomacy Strategy," *The Foreign Policy Centre*, November 2005.

established in 1954 when the ECSC was barely off the ground.<sup>9</sup> Now, the EU and US are each other's biggest trading partners, together making up around 40 % of global trade in goods, and almost half in global trade in services. They are also each other's biggest foreign direct investors. They work together in almost every area of security policy, both internal (terrorism, organized crime, trafficking) and external (peace, stability, development, and defense).<sup>10</sup>

The EU and US should have a natural affinity when it comes to cultural exchange because of the wide body of shared values that are at the core of their close strategic alliance: democracy, the rule of law, international cooperation, free market, fundamental freedoms, and so on. Even though these values often result in disagreements when it comes to the nitty gritty of politics and policies (i. e. the death penalty, approaches to counter-terrorism, use of force, visa reciprocity, some aspects of international humanitarian law, climate change, access to health care, and so on),<sup>11</sup> core shared values are arguably what really matter in providing a basis for effective cultural engagement.

European culture has a high status in the eyes of most Americans. At its core, European culture is also a central part of American culture as many Americans have European heritage, albeit from generations ago. As Wim Wenders, the famous German film director, said in a speech to the European Commission:

[The American Dream] was the dream dreamed by all the immigrants from 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century Europe, who had to leave their native countries for a wider variety of social and religious reasons to travel to that "Promised Land" called America. They dreamed the dream of the "Land of Opportunities", and it offered them precisely what they lacked at home: **a future**. It

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- 9 Beginning in 1974, the EU also launched the EU Visitors Program to bring future American leaders to Europe for tours of several weeks with the goal of enhancing mutual understanding. This was primarily for political, rather than cultural, aims. See: Scott-Smith, Giles. "Mending the 'Unhinged Alliance' in the 1970s: Transatlantic Relations, Public Diplomacy, and the Origins of the European Union Visitors Program," *Diplomacy & Statecraft*, 16(4), pp. 749-778.
  - 10 For examples of how the EU explains itself to Americans more generally, see: EU Delegation to the US, "The European Union: A Guide for Americans," 2008; "EU Focus: The European Union and the United States: A Long-Standing Partnership," *Delegation of the European Union*, December 2010; and Anthony Gooch, the Spokesman for the European Commission Delegation to the US, "Taking it to the U.S.: the EU's Greatest Public Diplomacy Challenge," April 19, 2006, University of Southern California Center on Public Diplomacy. [http://uscpublicdiplomacy.com/index.php/events/events\\_detail/1934/](http://uscpublicdiplomacy.com/index.php/events/events_detail/1934/).
  - 11 "The European Union and the United States: Global Partners, Global Responsibilities," *European Commission External Relations*. June 2006. Also, a November 2011 Pew Survey of the differences between American and European values provides evidence of the main differences: "American Exceptionalism Subsides: The American-Western European Values Gap," *Pew Research Global Attitudes Project*, November 17, 2011. <http://www.pewglobal.org/2011/11/17/the-american-western-european-values-gap/> (accessed April 15, 2013).



was this blend of European hopes and projections that gave rise to America; it was thus a European projection in the truest sense of the word. It was “our film” that was running there!<sup>12</sup>

Thus, there is often an immediate understanding of what it means if something is described as culturally “European,” more so perhaps than other cultures that have become enveloped into the overarching notion of “American culture.” There is an assumption among regular Americans that “European culture” is somehow more authentic, more sophisticated, more beautiful, more historical, and deservingly, more expensive than an average American cultural product or event. From architecture to food to movies, most Americans would assume that European culture is likely to be more serious and possessing a greater depth than its American equivalent. Of course, these are stereotypes and generalities, but it provides a snapshot of the essence of how Americans tend to hold European culture in high regard, even while they may at the same time regard American projection of hard power as more effective.

In more specific terms, it is perhaps illustrative to look at the example of film. Wendy Everett argues that European films are often unpopular, both to American and European audiences.<sup>13</sup> She notes that European films are generally of high quality, and that they are typically creative, diverse, and grapple with a wider range of issues than standard American films. They are also often low budget, and less audience-conscientious. Rather than aiming to be pure entertainment, in the tradition of Hollywood, European films are regarded as works of art best featured at film festivals rather than big IMAX multiplexes. As Everett argues, European films do not seek to satisfy audiences, but instead to *challenge* thinking in complex and unpredictable ways. They are less formulaic, and more about exploration of identity, transformation, and journeys. This formulation of European films is what Americans perceive. Artsy film houses in the US are only found in university towns or trendy city neighborhoods. Intellectuals, artists, and elites watch European films, not typical Americans in rural areas or small towns, although they are still often aware of what European films entail.

Wim Wenders argues that film alone has the potential to “consolidate an image” of Europe. However, even though film as a cultural product emerged in both

12 Wim Wenders, “The Image of Europe. Identification and Representation,” Discourse on Europe, Brussels, 11 June 2007.

13 Wendy Everett, “Dinosaur, Shipwreck or Museum Piece? The Unstable Identity of European Cinema,” in *The European Puzzle: The Political Structuring of Cultural Identities at a Time of Transition*, edited by Marion Demossier, New York: Berghahn Books, 2007. pp. 102-116.

Europe and the US around the same time, the latter took a far more aggressive approach.<sup>14</sup> Wenders writes:

The Americans were quicker to grasp the potential POWER that using pictures to tell stories would eventually bring. Instinctively, they knew they were backing a winner by using the power of pictures as a multiplier for their “American Dream” – indeed using it, ultimately, as a way to put out and spread their message. They were quick to realize this new medium had the potential to become one of the biggest industries worldwide.<sup>15</sup>

Thus, in the case of film, Americans are more successful both in projecting a positive and coherent image of themselves, and in selling a key cultural product widely.

In terms of high forms of European culture, such as fine art, theater, and music, Americans tend to view these in terms of European *heritage* or *tradition*. Ullrich Kockel distinguishes between heritage, culture, and tradition.<sup>16</sup> He defines heritage as “cultural patterns, practices, and objects that either are no longer handed down in everyday life or are handed down for a use significantly removed from their historical purpose and appropriate context – such as to attract tourism.”<sup>17</sup> Thus, culture becomes heritage when it is no longer actively a part of society. Kockel defines tradition as “cultural patterns, practices, and objects that are ‘handed down’ to a later generation, for use according to their purposes as appropriate to their context.”<sup>18</sup> Tradition adapts to new circumstances over time, whereas heritage does not, and culture is the current artistic expression of a society. Kockel’s understanding of these concepts is significant because most Americans tend to mainly perceive European culture, with the exception of film, as belonging to Europe’s heritage or tradition. To the extent that Europeans have a vibrant and innovative cultural life today, which of course they do, Americans are generally less aware of it. Indeed, Americans mostly visit Europe for the history.

European public diplomats have appreciated the importance of this problem, and have consciously tried to re-brand their cultures in an effort to convey the reality of Europe’s cultural creativity. A well-known example of this was the UK’s efforts to re-brand itself in the late 1990s as a less stuffy, more multicultural, and more creative country, brimming with new, young, and hip ideas.<sup>19</sup> This

14 Wim Wenders, “The Image of Europe. Identification and Representation,” Discourse on Europe, Brussels, 11 June 2007.

15 Ibid.

16 Ullrich Kockel, “Heritage Versus Tradition: Cultural Resources for a New Europe?” in *The European Puzzle: The Political Structuring of Cultural Identities at a Time of Transition*, edited by Marion Demossier, New York: Berghahn Books, 2007, pp. 85-101.

17 Ibid. p. 96.

18 Ibid. p. 97.

19 Martin Leonard and Andrew Small, with Martin Rose, “British Public Diplomacy in the ‘Age of Schisms,’” *The Foreign Policy Centre*, February 2005, pp. 2-3.

initiative, known as “Cool Britannia,” had mixed results at best.<sup>20</sup> A branding approach implies a kind of commodification of culture, often designed to attract tourists or investors, but at the expense of authenticity.<sup>21</sup> Peter van Ham argues, “Branding is less about *knowing* the EU than it is about *loving* it.”<sup>22</sup> But he adds, Europe should “shamelessly exploit its multicultural diversity.”<sup>23</sup> In a sense, this is what Americans have successfully done through film and other forms of popular and mainstream culture.

We can speak of European cultural products, but also of culture more generally. Somehow, with all of the focus on economic and political integration, the EU did not focus on culture until many decades after its founding.<sup>24</sup> Indeed, now it seems as though culture, not high politics, is the last holdout of national sovereignty in Europe. Even foreign and security policy has significant elements that have been Europeanized, especially with the 2009 Lisbon Treaty.<sup>25</sup> But culture is an area in which it is difficult for the EU to lead because it is still fully member states’ domain, or more appropriately, regions and cities within member states. The EU’s role in the cultural realm is formally only “to support, coordinate or supplement” the policies of its member states.<sup>26</sup> Consequently, only 1 % or around €170 million per year of the EU budget goes towards subsidies for the arts. This is less than even what a small member state like Estonia spends on culture by itself.<sup>27</sup> But there is tremendous added value from even this small role for the EU. Nearly all the cross-cultural exchange and circulation of art within Europe is paid for by the EU budget. Moreover, it is written into the EU treaties that European institutions must protect cultural diversity. Thus, the EU focuses on projects that will enhance diversity and maximize impact.

The EU’s cultural budget also subsidizes activities outside of Europe. For example, during the celebrations marking the EU’s 50<sup>th</sup> birthday, there were over 50 events in 19 American states for a period of 14 days.<sup>28</sup> EU delegations as well

20 Shaun Riordan, “Dialogue-based Public Diplomacy: A New Foreign Policy Paradigm?” *Clingendael Discussion Papers in Diplomacy*, No. 95, November 2004, p. 11.

21 Kockel, pp. 90-97.

22 Peter van Ham, “Branding European Power,” *Place Branding*, 1(2): 2005. p. 123.

23 Van Ham, p. 125.

24 Speech by Andras Bozoki, Minister of Culture of Hungary, “Cultural Policy and Politics in the European Union.”

25 Mai’a K. Davis Cross, *Security Integration in Europe: How Knowledge-based Networks are Transforming the European Union*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2011.

26 Philip Ebels, “EU culture budget: small and likely to get smaller,” *euobserver.com*, October 25, 2012.

27 Ibid.

28 European Commission, “A Glance at EU Public Diplomacy at Work,” Brussels: European Communities, 2007.

as member state embassies pooled their energy and resources to construct a program that involved numerous universities, schools, museums, local governments, research institutes, museums, and think tanks. In Washington DC alone, 38,000 people attended events at European embassies that explained European cultural diversity to the American public. These types of events, which occur all over the world, have a tremendous impact, but are still limited in terms of overall target audience.

### **Strategies for the Future: The US as a model for Europe?**

It is clear that the US has found successful ways of exporting its culture internationally. But could this strategy work for Europe? I argue that there is a lot more room for maximizing Europe's cultural impact, but it will not likely come from adopting a US-style strategy. This is mostly because to the extent that one can strategize about promoting culture through government-funded activities, the US has actually not done that well lately. Rather, American culture works for itself at the level of the cultural entrepreneurs themselves. The people-to-people, or networked dimension of US cultural diplomacy thrives, while the purposeful efforts of the US State Department fall a bit short. Why is the American approach to cultural diplomacy inappropriate for Europe?

First, US-style public diplomacy has not served the country well since 9/11. In the period between the end of the Cold War and 9/11, the US neglected public diplomacy. But when the government brought it back during the Bush administration in the wake of 9/11, it was treated more as a *war* of ideas rather than of relationship building.<sup>29</sup> Some of the efforts to promote American culture were surely hamstrung by the unpopularity of the Bush administration and foreign policy agenda. The Obama administration has a better image, but still not a very robust cultural diplomacy strategy. Dov Lynch argues that four major problems with the US's current approach are: (1) a lack of credibility especially in the Arab and Muslim world, (2) a war mentality of aggressively fighting information battles, (3) a culturally biased attitude that is too direct and often comes across as arrogant, and (4) a branding strategy based on corporate market-oriented strategies to "win" consumers.<sup>30</sup>

The fourth criticism is particularly relevant to the cultural dimension of public diplomacy. Americans tend to be quite good at marketing, branding, and pro-

29 Dov Lynch, "Communicating Europe to the World: What Public Diplomacy for the EU?" *European Policy Centre*, November 2005, p. 19.

30 pp. 20-21.

moting consumerism, but when it comes to cultural products, this strategy is often counter-productive. Noya argues that:

Countries which create their own brands are trying to lure investment, tourism, buyers, and so on. They are trying to *position themselves on the map* of significant nations in these areas. Public diplomacy seeks to convince, to transform the world by transforming ideas; it seeks to *change the map* of international relations.<sup>31</sup>

The main point of cultural diplomacy is less to make money, and more to build mutual understanding, networks, and transnational ties. As mentioned earlier, cultural approaches to foreign policy are at the core of protecting human rights, freedom of expression, and diversity. Economic growth and profit naturally follow from legitimate forms of cultural engagement. Indeed, the cultural sector in the EU employs 8.5 million workers (3.8 % of the EU's workforce), and is responsible for around 4.5 % of the EU's GDP.<sup>32</sup> Moreover, the Commission believes that the cultural sector is a "largely untapped resource" in the European economy,<sup>33</sup> and also finds that it is an industry with resilience, losing fewer jobs during the financial crisis compared to most other industries.<sup>34</sup> But the tail should not wag the dog. Culture is primarily about ideas and expression. Europe already has a largely positive external image;<sup>35</sup> it is just not maximizing its potential.

Second, the American dream – that anyone can succeed through hard work and opportunity – has been in decline since the 1970s.<sup>36</sup> At least one-third of Americans no longer believe in it. In the 1960s and earlier, American public diplomacy often seemed more legitimate, i.e. a real reflection of the spirit of the people, and there was significant government support to help amplify it around the world. Javier Noya observes:

In the fifties and sixties, the Department of State (DOS) promoted exhibitions of American abstract expressionism and sponsored tours by jazz musicians such as Dave Brubeck or Dizzy

31 Javier Noya, "The United States and Europe: Convergence or Divergence in Public Diplomacy?" *The present and future of public diplomacy: a European perspective; the 2006 Madrid conference on public diplomacy* / ed. J. Noya. Madrid: Real Instituto Elcano, 4 December 2006. pp. 1-6.

32 Philip Ebels, "EU culture budget: small and likely to get smaller," *euobserver.com*, October 25, 2012.

33 European Commission, "Commission from the Commission to the European Parliament, The Council, The European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions: Promoting cultural and creative sectors for growth and jobs in the EU," Brussels, September 26, 2012.

34 Benjamin Fox, "Culture sector an 'untapped' resource, says commission," *euobserver.com*, September 27, 2012.

35 Gallup International, *Voice of the People*, 2005.

36 Jeremy Rifkin, *The European Dream: How Europe's Vision of the Future Is Quietly Eclipsing the American Dream*, 2004.

Gillespie world-wide, from the communist block to Arab countries such as Iran. Jazz was genuinely American music, born in the United States, and it also represented freedom, improvisation in both strictly musical spheres and at social level, since it was an Afro-American minority product. And while the DOS was promoting jazz as American culture, jazz musicians like Max Roach, who did not participate in the DOS initiative, were releasing works such as the Freedom Suite in which they staked their claims to the civil rights, which at the time black people were denied in the United States.<sup>37</sup>

But after the Cold War, the US Information Agency was disbanded and certain departments were redistributed to other parts of government, significantly weakening the transnational cultural engagement that flourished so much in the 50s and 60s.

The European Dream, by contrast, is beginning to solidify, and it offers an appealing alternative to the American Dream. As Jeremy Rifkin describes it, the European Dream has the qualities of embeddedness, inclusivity, and belonging.<sup>38</sup> Rather than being based on religious heritage and faith, as in the American Dream, the European Dream is secular. As a transnational and multicultural vision, it is "one far better suited for the next stage in the human journey," according to Rifkin.<sup>39</sup> This dream is still in its nascence, but it is increasingly reflected in European culture and cultural products, especially as younger generations begin to take Europeanization for granted as a core part of their identities as European citizens.<sup>40</sup>

Third, there is a changing geo-political landscape in which developing countries in Asia, Africa, and Latin America have started to gain in wealth and power. It is important to recognize that although the transatlantic relationship is the most important in the world, and will be for the foreseeable future, the need to engage better with audiences that have less in common with Europe will be the challenge of the future. This is something that the US faces too, and with ongoing central implications for its own security and foreign policy.

The way in which Europeans can most learn from American cultural diplomacy is in terms of grappling with the reality of internal diversity. It is often noted that to speak of a European culture or identity is a misnomer because the languages, histories, national myths, and landscapes within Europe are so diverse. But the same is true of "American culture." From the jazz of New Orleans to the hula of Hawai'i to the architecture of Manhattan, there is nothing that is uniform

37 Javier Noya, "The United States and Europe: Convergence or Divergence in Public Diplomacy?" *The present and future of public diplomacy: a European perspective; the 2006 Madrid conference on public diplomacy* / ed. J. Noya. Madrid: Real Instituto Elcano, 4 December 2006. pp. 1-6.

38 Jeremy Rifkin, *The European Dream*, p. 77.

39 Ibid. p. 76.

40 Mai'a K. Davis Cross, "Identity Politics and European Integration," *Comparative Politics*, 44(2) (review article), pp. 229-246, January 2012.

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