

Investigating the Idea of Diplomatic Culture

by

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Abstract:

This paper analyses the idea of diplomatic culture from the cultural concepts used to define it. Two concepts of culture are presented in the first part of the paper – the humanistic and anthropologic one. In the second part we analyze two examples of substantializing the diplomatic culture. Albeit the anthropologic concept of culture is taken as the prevalent one in the contemporary social science we will see that the humanistic concept still outlasts in a modified form just in the idea of diplomatic culture.

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Introduction

Since the end of the Cold War we can see a market increase in interest in the subject of culture in the discipline of international relations. “Literature of multiculturalism, interest in cultural differences and specific regional values, as well as their relationship to international issues, such as human rights, all continue to influence the discipline.”¹

Culture has become a very well marketable commodity on the market of concepts within IR. After years of rejection of cultural diversity from IR agenda we observe some kind of “cultural turn”. But we do not know yet if it will serve to better understanding to “relations between nation” or if it is a step aside. The truth is that the word culture belongs to the broadest concepts used in social sciences². “The concept of culture acquires different meanings in diverse contexts and must, ..., indeed be reckoned among so-called essentially contested concepts.”³ And we can justly ask why we should import such a questionable concept into IR.

In my paper I have decided to analyze the diplomatic culture how it is used in current IR discourse from the view of cultural concept used in the attempts to substantialize diplomatic culture. As a base I have used the latest works of two authors occupied by the idea of diplomatic culture – Paul Sharp and Geoffrey Wiseman⁴.

Conceptualizing culture in IR

The main arguments for rejection of culture in IR were (1) that power gears the relations among states and so IR should abstract of every attribute of states except their capabilities and concentrate solely on power; (2) and the second argument was posed by the positivist IR. For them culture represents uncatchable entity in terms of positivist social science methodology. According to them science should address commonalities and regularities rather than culture bound particularities.⁵ But these arguments stems

¹ REEVES, J. (2004)

² WALLERSTEIN, I. (1992): p. 158

³ VALBJORN, M. (2004): p. *(notes)*

⁴ WISEMAN G. (2004)

SHARP, P. (2004)

⁵ VALBJORN, M. (2004)

from one concept of culture that is now regarded as the leading one in contemporary social sciences.

But Julia Reeves claims that at the beginning of the twentieth century, when we put the outset of institutionalization of IR as a separate discipline within social sciences, the culture was conceptualized in other ways. In her book *Culture and International relations* she provided a historical survey of the development of the idea of culture from the perspective of international relations. She identifies two concepts of culture – the humanistic one and the anthropologic one – that has dominated one after the other in IR.

“The difference between the idea that culture represents the ‘best of everything’ that had been thought, said and, for that matter, produced, and the idea that ‘we are our culture’, which suggests the admittance of everything including the worst of things, is considerable.”⁶

And although Reeves identifies absolute supremacy of the anthropologic concept at the end of the century we can see just in the idea of diplomatic culture the reminiscence on the universalistic – humanistic idea of culture.

Humanistic concept of culture

From the historical perspective the humanistic concept of culture is the older one. It is tight together with the etymological roots of the Italian word “cultura” – to cultivate. “The humanist concept of culture embodies the ‘best of everything’, a sense of self-awareness, spiritual growth and improvement.”⁷ Culture represented the best what was produced in literature, music and art. This notion also embraced the enlightenment idea of progress – not the ordinary progress in society (which was at that time contained in the word civilization) – but the aspiration to better oneself. Culture could be the instrument for cultivation and development of individual. For the IR the accent on cosmopolitanism and universalism is important. This concept is not associated with difference but rather with the idea that the best produced by one society can be understood by the other society. In humanist terms culture is something to be esteemed and respected universally, it doesn’t denote values of a specific cultural – national type. “The achievements that every local community produces are capable of

⁶ REEVES, J. (2004): p. 1

⁷ REEVES, J. (2004): p. 36

being recognized and admired beyond that community by all human beings.”⁸ Here we can see the link between the humanistic concept of culture and the universalistic idea of the early IR theorists.

International relations as a separate discipline come into being as “doping” discipline.⁹ After the horrors of the First World War there has been a strong call for change in “relations among nations”. Among consequences of this call were establishing of the League of Nations, progress of international law (expulsion of war as a legal mean of foreign policy), institutionalization of discipline scientifically investigating international world reality (in terms of social science of August Comte) and reception of culture as a mean how to cultivate the international relations. “If people became more cultured, then they would change their habits and behavior; this would mean that they would become more civilized, which would, if all went to plan, affect the nature of international relations. In the short run, it could prevent war, and in the long run, it could lead to a whole world order.”¹⁰ The education should play the master role in the promotion of the international relations to a higher stage of being as we can see in the work of an early IR scientist – later labeled as idealist – Norman Angel.

But the humanistic idea weakened as it was challenged by theoretical problems, above all the inability to distinguish the cultural relations from propaganda and strong normativeness.

Anthropologic concept of culture

The anthropological concept of culture emerged in the United States during the twenties of the Twentieth Century and was fully constructed during the Second World War¹¹. This concept is occupied by the idea of difference. It directs our attention to diversity and to something dividing people from each other.¹² In Tyler’s early conception (today’s classic definition) - “Culture or Civilization, taken in its wide ethnographic sense, is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by a man as a

⁸ REEVES, J. (2004): p. 20

⁹ BOOTH, K. (2001): p. 183

¹⁰ REEVES, J. (2004): p. 41

¹¹ REEVES, J. (2004): p. 87

¹² VALBJORN, M. (2004): p. 2

member of society.”¹³ According to this idea every community has a unique culture that is to be appreciated in its own terms and is marked by a unique logic.

Anthropologic concept of culture was fully embraced by the realists – a new paradigm or stream of theorizing within IR after the Second World War. Bible of realist – the Morgenthau’s work *Politics among nations* relies fully on this idea and marks the entrance of it within IR. “The same item of information and the same idea mean something different to an American, a Russian, and an Indian; for that item of information and that idea are perceived by, assimilated to, and filtered through minds conditioned by different conceptions of what is true, good, and politically desirable and expedient.”¹⁴

The anthropologic concept took hold in IR so intensively also because the core of IR (and political sciences generally) shifted from European continent to United States. A lot of influential political scientist were of Jewish origin and were forced to leave their homelands. And American social science fully integrated the anthropological concept.¹⁵

It was strongly influenced by the Talcot Parson’s¹⁶ systemic theory adopted from Bertalanffy theory of metabolic systems. Culture was described as a system of constructed regulations of human activity that provide balance and enable operation of society.¹⁷ According to this notion culture was everything what describes us as a part of certain community without any normative appraisal of good or bad behaviour.

But this concept was not accepted universally in the beginning. The British retained to view culture in its humanistic sense or at least were occupied with the idea of existence of universal common culture at the international level in which we can see the reminiscence to the humanistic concept.

Culture and the English School

History of the English school theory extends to the year 1959 when a *Committee to investigate the fundamental questions of international theory* was established. The

¹³ Tylor (1903):1 cf: REEVES. J. (2004): p. 64

¹⁴ MORGENTHAU (1962): p. 265

¹⁵ see HOFFMAN. S. (1977)

¹⁶ see PARSONS. T. (1951)

¹⁷ LEHMANNOVÁ. Z. (1999): p. 49

idea underlying this measurement was to discuss the work on international politics within a group of like-minded scholars. The speciality of the English School or International society theory (as it is sometimes called) consist in reserving the idea of culture a specific place in its conception of international relations. The essential concept of the English School is that of the existence of International society (society of states) that is secured through the conception of common culture at the international level.

In the works of early scholars of the English school we can recognize some ambiguity in embracing culture. On the one hand they individuated culture in anthropological terms by writing about “culture differences” or “other cultures”¹⁸ and on the other they crossed the anthropologically defined boundaries of national cultures by addressing certain unity at the international level to transcendent difference in some way. This notion is in a way connected with the idea of culture from the inter World Wars period where culture was not understood as a source of difference but as a instrument to overcome difference expressed in other then cultural terms (e.g. racial, national, civilizational).¹⁹ Just this specific idea of culture we can find in diplomatic culture conceptualized by Geoffrey Wiseman.

Fundamental norms of Diplomatic culture

Geoffrey Wiseman defines diplomatic culture as “accumulated communicative and representational norms, rules, and institutions that occur between interacting political entities”.²⁰ He recognizes as norms and values the desirability of mutual recognition and representation, continuous dialogue, and peaceful dispute resolution, as institutions the foreign ministries and embassies, and as processes the diplomatic communications and accreditation.

For circumscribing the single world culture he uses the Geert Hofstede’s definition that describes culture as “the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from another.” This is a classical anthropological definition that stresses the diversity and according to it we should be able to recognize also several diplomatic cultures. Instead of it Wiseman

¹⁸ REEVES, J. (2004): p. 115

¹⁹ REEVES, J. (2004): p. 120

²⁰ WISEMAN, G. (2004): p. 2

stresses the common (universalistic) character of his notion of diplomatic culture. He assumes a-priori the norms, values, processes and institutions enumerated above as universally acceptable within the international system. Albeit he admits the Western origins of diplomatic culture he normatively implies that “diplomatic culture can rise above its Western origins and emerge as a new transcendental discourse that draws in all-comers in the society of states: great powers and small; rich and poor; democratic and nondemocratic.”²¹

But Wiseman says very little about the process of acceptance of such norms and modes of conduct. He only notes that diplomatic culture has evolved over centuries and this process was of political character. From the list of examples of the content of diplomatic culture we can implicitly assume that it contains the norms that were chosen as the best modes of conduct. Here we can also feel the intimation of the humanistic concept of culture with its universalistic and cosmopolitan view. By cloning the humanistic and anthropological concept of cultures he could avoid the black hole of cultural relativism.

In Wiseman’s concept the diplomatic culture is something that has evolved among *political entities*. He doesn’t further specify this term. But from the context we can interpret it as states and then his notion of diplomatic culture is very close to Hedley Bull’s “international political culture”²². Wiseman’s list of five fundamental norms further promotes this link. He specifies them as – (1) preferring force over diplomacy, (2) privileging intelligence rather than supporting diplomacy, (3) discarding the multilateral norms, (4) ignoring basic diplomatic courtesies, and (5) displacing the ambassadors with military commanders²³. Connection of these norms with diplomatic culture as defined above is at least little odd. Diplomacy will always prefer diplomacy over force and privilege itself over intelligence. These norms could be better understood by giving them in the context of the English school concept of *International society* and razing them as norms of international political culture – “the intellectual and moral culture that determines the attitudes toward the states system of the societies that compose it”²⁴.

²¹ WISEMAN, G. (2004): p. 7

²² BULL, H. (1977): p. 304

²³ WISEMAN, G. (2004): p. 16

²⁴ BULL, H. (1977): p. 304

Different approach to diplomatic culture we can meet by analyzing the Paul Sharp's conception.

The Autonomous component in Diplomatic Culture

Paul Sharp comprehends "diplomatic culture in the sense of a common set of experiences, pool of memories, way of thinking, reasoning and communicating"²⁵. His approach to diplomatic culture is that of sociology of a specific small group that is confronted with the existence of cultures in the sense of embodiment of the different ways of life. His conception of culture goes along with the anthropologic idea with a very strong stress on political dimension of such embodiment of differences among societies. Sharp permits the idea that the world is divided into several "big cultures" (or civilizations) but he doesn't consider them as the real actors or main forces of the world. "It is the India and China which act in the world who are the real collective actors in the world, not the civilizations of which they happen to be the principal bearers and vehicles."²⁶ In this connection he recognizes the existence of international society as a organizing principal of international system with a glimmer of humanistic idea of culture - "...the state system remains the most important formal organizing principle of international system, ...most people believe that this formal organizing principle best captures how the world actually lives, must live, and ought to live. They argue much more about the practical application of the states system, especially over who gets their own state and who does not, than they argue about whether or not the world should be curved up into states."

But then Sharp continues to analyze diplomatic culture in purely anthropological context looking for the essential core of it. He comes out with the idea of the *autonomous component* in diplomatic culture that should be a parallel to the cultural anthropologists searching for cultural patterns that determine the specifics of every culture. The autonomous component in Sharp's account is the ability of diplomats to operate in the space between cultures (understood as "big cultures" represented by states). The aim of diplomatic culture is not to reconcile the differences between the different modes of life but to find a "way of living with differences

²⁵ SHARP, P. (2004): p. 373

²⁶ SHARP, P. (2004): p. 370

unresolved”²⁷ by recognizing what was important to the other side without understanding why. This helps Sharp to overcome the cultural relativism by decreasing the importance of understanding different cultures in a sense of finding the explanations why people behave how they behave. This is a typical approach of the concept of multicultural communication.²⁸

The Autonomous component of diplomatic culture is the ability of diplomats to be aware of own cultural roots with respect to cultural rootage of the counterparts. Diplomats can absorb this ability either by experience (acculturating by diplomatic community) or by training them at the outset of their careers.

Conclusion

By reading the texts of the authors engaged with the idea of diplomatic culture from the view of which concept of culture was used by them we saw that it could acquire different content.

In the first part of the paper we have introduced two concepts of culture – the anthropologic and humanistic one. Albeit the anthropologic concept is considered to be as a prevalent in contemporary social sciences we could see reminiscence to humanistic concept in one of the analyzed examples of substantiating the diplomatic culture.

In the first example we have introduced the diplomatic culture in a form of international political culture represented by norms and processes of universal character taking place within political actors of International society. In the second case we have discerned the diplomatic culture through investigating the cultural pattern of it in a form of the *Autonomous element of diplomatic culture*. Diplomatic culture in this notion resemble to an encounter culture.

²⁷ SHARP, P. (2004) : p. 378

²⁸ See e.g. LEHMANNOVÁ, Z. 1999: p. 55

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