

At Home, Abroad

A Comparative Study of International Cultural Promotion Organizations

INTRODUCTION

In his book *Culture and Imperialism*, the literary critic Edward Said remarks,

There is in all nationally defined cultures, I believe, an aspiration to sovereignty, to sway, and to dominance. In this, French and British, Indian and Japanese cultures concur. At the same time, paradoxically, we have never been as aware as we now are of how oddly hybrid historical and cultural experiences are, of how they partake of many often contradictory experiences and domains, cross national boundaries, defy the *police* action of simple dogma and patriotism. Far from being monolithic or autonomous things, cultures actually assume more “foreign” elements, alterities, differences, than they consciously exclude (Said 1993: 15).

With this in mind, suffice it to say that the diplomacy - both formal and informal - that occurs between and among “all nationally defined cultures” is much more of an art of give and take than anything else; with so many factors at play and with so many permutations of culture, language, and current events, there is never a hard and fast way to interact internationally. This is the very reason why foreign diplomats undergo so much training - in language(s), in bilateral policy, and furthermore in making a concerted effort towards understanding the peoples and places in whose midst they are placed as representatives of foreign governments. Ideally, they must be prepared for any contingency. But of course this is only a ideal. In the real world, one misplaced comment or misunderstood joke could ultimately mean the difference between copacetic relations and tumultuous scandal. Conversely, one mutually respectful relationship between two analogous

diplomats could mean the difference between bringing a project to fruition or allowing it to languish in bureaucratic stagnation.

But beyond this “art” of diplomacy, the *arts* in their traditional sense (along with the humanities in general) offer a nexus through which members of different nations and/or cultures may cast aside more formal geopolitics in the pursuit of both identifying and celebrating our commonly shared qualities as human beings. It is from this standpoint that we arrive at the concept of “cultural internationalism,” defined here by Akira Iriye: “Cultural internationalism entails a variety of activities undertaken to link countries and peoples through the exchange of ideas and persons, through scholarly cooperation, or through efforts at facilitating cross-national understanding” (Iriye 1997: 3). But how do these endeavors look and feel on the ground level, day to day, and from the perspectives of those who take part in them? While much is written about political science, diplomacy, international relations, geopolitics, and other related topics, one corner of this area has yet to be amply studied: *international cultural promotion organizations*, also known as *(inter)national cultural centers*, *cultural institutes*, or *cultural agencies*.¹

This paper aims to reveal and review the various cultural promotion organizations around the world, representing a wide range of intercultural and international interests. I will take a comparative and historical approach of these institutions while also analyzing their effects in relation to their home countries’ diplomatic or other strategic goals. Keeping within the purview of this course, perspectives on international librarianship will also be incorporated.

¹ In the context of this paper, any of these terms would be accurate if referring to those entities functioning abroad as opposed to internally/domestically. I normally opt for the acronym ICPO for brevity’s sake.

1. BACKGROUND ON INTERNATIONAL CULTURAL PROMOTION ORGANIZATIONS (ICPO'S)

For the purposes of clarity - and since no definition for the various terms above could be found in any reference works consulted - I offer this interpretation:

International cultural promotion organization (ICPO or CPO): a (usually) *nationally sponsored* international institute, center, library, combination thereof, or other related organization that aims to spread a given nation's culture, language, and/or other ideas/ideals to and among foreign nationals in the host nation.

Based on my research on this topic thus far, this is as specific a definition as I might dare at this point. Furthermore, any attempt at strict parameters for certain sets of terminology within the international relations field must be taken with a grain of salt: As Mariella Totaro-Genevois admits, "the notion of 'cultural relations' still has no clear agreed definition. Broadly speaking what can be found on the topic is a relatively small body of literature: some essays and a few books, mostly from the disciplines of politics and history...the various authors are concerned to argue that [cultural relations] exist as an autonomous form of interaction between nations" (Totaro-Genevois 2005: 9). Flexibility in our notions of these issues, then, must be essential.

In the article "Exporting National Culture: Histories of Cultural Institutes Abroad," Gregory Paschalidis gives a thorough historical overview of how many of the first recognized ICPO's came about. He begins,

It is widely believed that the origins of the globally familiar presence of the British Council, the French, the Italian or the Goethe Institute, lie in the *mission civilisatrice* of European colonialism. This belief, however, is rather inaccurate. A close study of the beginnings of these institutions reveals a complex picture with diverse patterns (Paschalidis 2009: 277).

As he shows, the “complex picture with diverse patterns” at this early stage (around the turn of the twentieth century) was perhaps rather divorced from how we perceive cultural diplomacy today.

The then-recently unified German nation-state (as of 1871), for example, sought to maintain links with ethnic German emigres (by no means a homogeneous group) through the “All-German School Association for the Preservation of Germanhood Abroad” (*Allgemeiner Deutscher Schulverein zur Erhaltung des Deutschtums im Auslande*, 1881). Italy maintained a similar program around the same era, the Società Dante Alighieri, founded in 1889.² At this point, these governments were not nearly as interested in spreading their languages and cultural capital to foreign nationals - either inside or outside of their borders - as much as they sought to maintain strong spiritual and nationalistic links with the citizens who had opted to immigrate to other countries: “[I]mportantly, under the ideological heading of ‘cultural nationalism,’ state government made no significant attempts at taking direct control over the day-to-day activities of the various schools and institutes abroad. This changed dramatically with the outbreak of World War I” (Varga 2013: 443). Some, like Varga, have argued that this was inherently a Sisyphean task that was not properly revised until after World War II and Germany in particular was in need of a public relations makeovers in the Goethe-Institute (Ibid: 445).

Due to the nature of assimilation of Italians and Germans into, in many cases, new host cultures with strong traditions of nationalism (e.g., the United States), clearly it was only a matter of time before such priorities and links were to be reconsidered, if not entirely reconfigured. As Varga points out above, certainly the major, cataclysmic geopolitical events of

² Totaro-Genevois reports that an estimated 26 million Italians had emigrated to other countries between 1870 and 1970 (2005: 1).

the first half of the twentieth century greatly influenced much of the gradual change in approach. What's more, as immigrants begat children partially or wholly unfamiliar with the "old country," many of the prior preoccupations with such issues of clinging to diaspora populations dwindled on a more nuclear familial level as well.

Four Phases

Paschalidis presents four distinct historical phases in the development of ICPO's:

1. Cultural Nationalism (1870s-1914);
2. Cultural Propaganda (1914-1945);
3. Cultural Diplomacy (1945-1989);
4. Cultural Capitalism (1989-present).

The first phase, Cultural Nationalism, was dominated by three nations: Italy, Germany, and France³. As stated, initially the intent was reactionary, as a means to maintain cultural and linguistic links with far-flung diasporas. But they also attempted to provide a strong degree of spiritual and philanthropic support to their constituencies. In other words, these two early forms - Italian and German - of ICPO's were more similar to what are known as benevolent societies and still exist today in ethnic enclaves around the world. What's more, these organization's attempts to piggyback their nations' very recently instigated nation-building endeavors were essential factors.

As for the other two members of "the big four," France and Great Britain entered this phase in the context of already centuries-established antagonism. As such, they also battled for the hearts and minds of their contested colonial territories' citizenry, especially in the Near and Middle East. In the last decades of the nineteenth century, Great Britain militarily dominated

³ Along with Great Britain, these nations comprise what are termed "the big four" (Paschalidis 2009: 284)

countries like Egypt and its sphere (the Sudan, Palestine, etc.). Nevertheless, “in the Ottoman Empire in 1914 over 40% of those educated in foreign schools attended French ones, while French was the most widely used language in the Middle East” (Ibid: 279). The *Alliance Française* itself was founded in 1883 as a secular vehicle for French culture and language in French colonies and abroad. France’s previous worldwide military dominance was on the wane and “soft power” was considered a strategic reconfiguration (Ibid: 278). Conversely, the British Council was not to be created for another 51 years, in 1934.

The second phase, Cultural Propaganda (1914-1945), was bookended by the start of World War I and the end of World War II. The more idealistic nature of the previous phase made way for the more pragmatic urgency of wartime prioritization and compromise. It was during this era that Great Britain entered the fray with the British Council (for Relations with Other Countries), initiated by the Foreign Office, “an organization whose mission was viewed by government officials as more unambiguously ‘cultural propaganda’ than the national committee on intellectual cooperation” (Iriye 1997: 117). Certainly the threat of fascism on behalf of the Axis powers was a strong incentive for Great Britain to act in such a decisive manner. But the momentum, thus officialized as policy *and* a new organized entity, was also a continuation of trends already propagated in the earlier phase of ICPO development through the expansion and consolidation of the British Empire and its commercial trade. What’s more, the global prestige of English literature, other forms of culture (including sport), and the use of the English language as an international lingua franca were concomitantly on the rise during this period.

During this same era, Italy’s Dante Alighieri Society began to take on the role of an “instrument of political propaganda” (Totaro-Genevois 2005: 88) and thus opened up a loophole

for fascist ideology to be spread among Italians and italophiles at home and abroad. In 1940, by decree of the Italian king, Victor Emmanuel III, and Prime Minister Benito Mussolini, the establishment of the IIC, or *Instituti Italiani di Cultura*, was signed into law as a more formal, organized approach to cultural diplomacy, although “La Dante” continued to exist. Both entities are active to this day, though both appear to operate “without the support of a consistent foreign cultural policy” (Ibid: 59).

In the third phase, Cultural Diplomacy (1945-1989), the Cold War dictated much of how nations and their respective cultures related to one another. Most markedly, the Soviet Union and the United States polarized the world towards communism or capitalism, respectively: “Moscow was...active in organizing youth conferences that tried to promote a worldwide movement against bourgeois civilization” (Iriye 1997: 85). The so-called Comintern (a portmanteau of “Communist International”), the international diplomatic apparatus of the Soviet Union, “sought to influence foreign opinions of the Soviet state through open propaganda as well as clandestine activities” (Ibid: 86). For its part, the United States Information Agency (USIA), formed in 1953⁴, absorbed the already popular Fulbright Program for international, bilateral scholarships (established in 1946) was an “independent agency reporting to the President through the National Security Council” (Mitchell 1986: 56). Furthermore, it “took over cultural relations work from the State Department but remained closely aligned with American foreign policy” (Ibid: 67). In the case of both hegemony, international cultural diplomacy was not merely an aspect of their respective foreign policies, but major priorities in the battle for ideological supremacy. Paschalidis adds, “The location of the hundreds of US and USSR cultural centres and libraries

⁴ Dissolved in 1999.

around the world attests to the fact that the main objective was ‘winning the hearts and minds’ of people in the contested regions outside the direct control of the two super-powers. Predictably, when the Cold War started to ease, all this feverish activity came to an abrupt end” (Paschalidis 2009: 282).

That brings us to the fourth and current phase (1989 - present), that of Cultural Capitalism, which coincides with the end of the Cold War and the advent of the Internet Era. The ICPO’s established during the early years of this period (e.g., those of Spain and South Korea (1991), Portugal and Greece (1992), the Czech Republic (1993), and Estonia (1995)) have been from their beginnings well immersed in the new and hopeful ideology that a more open, interconnected world has promised. The rise in influence and organization of both the European Union and UNESCO (the United Nations Educational Scientific, and Cultural Organization, created in 1945), during the post-Cold War era has also greatly facilitated this process, though not without its challenges and complexities. This confluence can further be understood through the nexus of the Maastricht Treaty of 1992, whereby the European Union’s engagement with the European integration process was accelerated. Meanwhile, during this time, UNESCO had only recently taken a markedly non-elitist policy towards “culture” (Ibid: 283-84).

Paschalidis summarizes this current phase: “In the multipolar world of the post-Cold War era, where an odd mixture of old and new nationalisms co-exists uneasily with supranational formations and transnational processes, the century-old instrument of the Cultural Institute abroad seems ready for its most vigorous growth yet” (Paschalidis 2009: 284). Or, taking the more cynical route, Varga postulates that “foreign cultural policy has become economized, de-politicized, and transformed to assist ‘nation branding’ efforts” (Varga 2013: 442).

2. COMPARATIVE STRUCTURES

J.M. Mitchell (1986: 70) breaks down the different models for the conduct of ICPO's within the framework of his interpretation of cultural relations:

1. Government control (e.g., France, Italy, USA);
2. Non-governmental, autonomous agencies (e.g., UK, Japan, Commonwealth nations);
3. Mixed system (e.g., Germany);
4. Voluntary system (e.g., Mexico, Poland).

ICPO's follow states' geopolitical priorities and interests (Paschalidis 2009: 282). For example, while, domestically, the United States is politically divided over the role of the public sector in educational and cultural matters, externally its Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs/EducationUSA functions on a uniform basis of meeting foreign demand and is tightly overseen by the US Department of State. France too offers a highly unified, governmentally controlled front in the form of its Alliance Française, though the classically French concept of that nation's *mission civilisatrice* is never far behind (Ibid: 277).

In the case of Japan's earlier-termed KBS (*Kokusai Bunka Shinkokai* - the Society for International Cultural Relations) - which, since 1972 has been reorganized and marketed as the Japan Foundation - priorities of library development have been instituted throughout, drawing comparisons to the similarly autonomous British Council's activity (Iriye 1997: 119-123). In the case of the mixed system of Germany's Goethe-Institute, Varga illustrates: "The realization of [its] potential...in foreign policy matters...led to control efforts by the government, though such attempts did not aim to jeopardize the Institute's status as a private intermediary organization" (Varga 2013: 446). Finally, in the case of Poland and the voluntary model, the Adam Mickiewicz Institute collaborates strategically with a few international partners while maintaining many of its

programs within Poland itself. This has necessitated the existence of, for example, the Copernicus Center in Chicago, home to the largest expatriate Polish population outside of Warsaw. In fact, this independent non-profit predates the Mickiewicz Institute by almost thirty years and thus reflects the cultural demands of the Polish community abroad while the fatherland was transitioning from communism to democracy after World War II.

3. THE CURRENT ENVIRONMENT

An article in a series about ICPO's in South Korea from the *Korea Herald* details one important aspect of the involvement of the British Council in Seoul: "[I]t's very much a two-way event. So we'll be getting together with the VIPs from the British universities, some students who studied in the U.K., and British students studying here and talk about what's the value of global perspective, how did they get to study overseas, and how we could encourage more people to do this and more" (Lee 2012). Education - and particularly higher education - seems to be a common denominator throughout the emerging roles of the ICPO's.

Miller and Yudice note in their *Cultural Policy* that "[t]oday, culture is not just a problem of political pressure - it is one more category for commodification...We can see played out here the mix of national-popular ideology and cultural industrialization..." (Miller and Yudice 2002: 184). This current period has also seen the dissolvment of the erstwhile propaganda-heavy USIA mentioned above, yielding to a more ostensibly multilateral foreign policy in the form of the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs (ECA; established in 1961 under the US Department of State) and its subsidiaries (including the Fulbright Program) as the new principal

engines of American cultural diplomacy.⁵ Specifically, one of these subsidiaries, EducationUSA, mentioned above, attempts to meet international demands for information regarding American higher education with “accurate, comprehensive, and current information about how to apply to accredited U.S. colleges and universities” (EducationUSA 2014).

Another instance highlights the often complex nature of such matters, especially when the parties involved are representatives of distinct cultural and ideological traditions:

While there is no shortage of international criticism of the [Confucius] institutes, for now, CAUT [Canadian Association of University Teachers] certainly seems to be in the minority. Operators of Canadian Confucius Institutes roundly maintain they have no desire to influence politics, and are solely in place to teach Mandarin and promote cultural understanding. It is on this basis that the program has repeatedly been welcomed with open arms by Canadian universities - albeit with the occasional condition that the school agrees not to contravene Canadian law. "The real purpose of the Confucius Institute is to build bridges between the host country, the host institution and China," said British Columbia Institute of Technology vice-president Jim Reichert in 2008, soon after the Vancouver school became the first in Canada to accept a Confucius Institute (Hopper 2014).

Clearly, such great potential for cooperation and cross-cultural exchange comes not without a certain degree of compromise and perhaps hard-won mutual understanding. The universal “good” of education has done much for diplomatic endeavors, though its implementation on a micro-level may nevertheless call for hands-on negotiations at every stage, as seen above.

4. PERSPECTIVES ON LIBRARIANSHIP

Frances Donaldson, in *The British Council: The First Fifty Years*, emphasizes, “The cultural institute, with its library and programme of events, is a natural focus for the sharing of literary

⁵ Notably, the United States Peace Corps, whose mission includes a strong multilateral educational component, has been an independent federal agency since its foundation in 1961 (*Encyclopedia Britannica Online Academic Edition* 2014).

interests” (Donaldson 1984: 208). Whether at the Instituto Camões in Maputo, Mozambique or the Confucius Institute in Los Angeles, ICPO’s are meeting points between cultures - centers where important personal and interpersonal intellectual breakthroughs may take place. And these centers’ libraries - like those on university campuses around the world - often serve as ground zero for such breakthroughs. “By 1961,” Donaldson continues, “the Council was running 125 of its own libraries in about 60 countries and supplying material to about another 55, of which 30 had recently been opened in African and Asian countries. Most of these were used for reference and study purposes and also for lending. The issues in India alone totalled 812,000 in 1961” (Ibid: 221).

In an article of 1997, not long before the reconfiguration of the United States’ cultural policy (when the USIA was dissolved), a USIA career foreign service officer airs his concerns for the future of his agency, its facilities, and its overall effectiveness: “In closing libraries abroad, what about their role as a cultural center, a place where people can meet not only to gather information but to exchange and discuss ideas? Can even virtual-reality software create such an environment?” (Lewis 1997: 50). Putting his statement in historical perspective - after the end of the Cold War but before September 11, 2001 - the author’s plea seems almost quaint. Nevertheless, if a national government is to take its cultural diplomacy seriously, he is correct in his assertion that libraries must be key components of such policies.

Taking matters into their own hands as a non-governmental organization in this context of international cooperation, the IFLA (International Federation of Library Associations and Institutes) committed to a strategic plan in a 2008 article, including “supporting basic human development issues: literacy, lifelong learning, bridging the digital divide and sustainable

development” (Gorman et al. 2008) through various worldwide initiatives, particularly in the Global South. Furthermore, IFLA has historically maintained an exceptionally influential role in the context of librarianship as international diplomacy: “At the [IFLA] conference in London in 1948 President Wilhelm Munthe warned of the dangers to library cooperation posed by the ideological confrontation between the two super-powers. He asked, “...Shall we, the torchbearers of enlightenment, end as gravediggers of science and scholarship?” (Glynn 2004: 12). Perhaps the stakes of today are not quite the same - though many would argue no less dire - there is potent potential for NGO’s like IFLA in either direct or indirect cooperation with (usually) governmental organizations like the ICPO’s to effect lasting change in the world.

5. CONCLUSIONS

As J.M Mitchell observes, “Activities arranged by cultural agencies create a favourable impression on foreigners in leading positions, either directly as with high culture, or indirectly through the reputation built up by more routine operations in their countries such as language classes, libraries, etc.” (Mitchell 1986: 15). In the case of Germany, Varga details,

...in 2001, looking back on 50 years of Goethe-Institute activities, president Hilmar Hoffmann maintained that the leitmotif of the last 50 years of work was to restore Germany as a cultural nation and ‘to win back the cultural recognition of Germany.’ In the same vein, Leonhard retrospectively defined the *raison d’etre* of the Goethe-Institute as ‘the amelioration of Germany’s reputation,’ a task that he argues the organization has succeeded in fulfilling (Varga 2013: 446).

The efforts of ICPO’s may differ from nation to nation and from era to era. Most scholars that I reviewed for my research on this topic seem to be in agreement that this is an area of international relations that warrants more thorough study and that its “critical investigation...[is] still in its infancy” (Paschalidis 2009: 286). Nevertheless, the various websites for the ICPO’s

(see Section 6. below) provided a wealth of information, not only in terms of factual details, but also from the critical perspective of what each chose to include or *not* include in their respective presentations. In this sense, the “marketization of foreign cultural policy” (Varga 2013), mentioned above, seems particularly prescient.

I look forward to further researching this topic from a critical standpoint while also delving deeper into a comparative analysis of the varying systems/models.

6. APPENDIX I: Active/prominent international cultural promotion organizations⁶

Nation	Inst. name	Founded	Main partner(s)/ focus	In USA?	Main US sites
1. Andorra	Fundació Ramon Llull	2008	Catalonia (Spain)	No	N/A
2. Brazil*	Rede Cultural Brasil	1962	Other S. American nations and Lusophone (CPLP) nations	No	N/A
3. China	Confucius Institute	2004	Worldwide	Yes	All major US cities and nationwide (458)
4. Czech Republic	Czech Centres	1993	Other European nations	Yes	New York City
5. Denmark	Danish Cultural Institute	1940	UK, Baltic states, Brazil, China, Russia, Benelux	No	N/A
6. Estonia	Estonian Institute	1995	Finland, Hungary	No	N/A
7. Finland	Association of Finnish Cultural and Academic Institutes	2005	Europe (13 countries), Japan, Middle East	Yes	New York City
8. France	Alliance Française	1883	Worldwide	Yes	Multiple: New York, Los Angeles, Chicago (100+)

⁶ Hyperlinked websites are sources of all information. Per my definition of ICPO's in Section 1., this list mostly corresponds to nationally funded programs. Former incarnations or defunct institutions are excluded. In some cases, similarly functioning NGO's/non-profits are listed separately (e.g., Poland).

9. Germany	Goethe-Institut	1951	Europe, USA, South America, Africa	Yes	Most major US cities (6)
10. Greece	Hellenic Foundation for Culture	1992	Egypt, Germany, Eastern Europe, Australia	No	N/A
11. Hungary	Balassi Institute	1927	Europe (13 countries), Russia, India, Egypt, USA	Yes	New York City
12. India	Indian Institute for Cultural Relations	1979	South Asia and worldwide	No	N/A
13. Italy	Società Dante Alighieri ; Italian Institutes of Culture	1889; 1940	Western Europe and worldwide; worldwide (90 total)	Yes	New York City, Boston, Miami, Seattle, Anchorage, Denver, Pittsburgh, Pueblo (NM), Detroit; NYC, LA, San Francisco
14. Japan	Japan Foundation	1972	Asia, Australia, and the Americas	Yes	New York City, Los Angeles
15. Poland	Adam Mickiewicz Institute	2000; 1971	Asia, Turkey, Brazil; USA	No...	Chicago: Copernicus Center (non-profit)
16. Portugal	Instituto Camões	1992	Lusophone Africa + East Timor, EU, Latin America, USA, Canada, Senegal, S. Africa	Yes	Boston, Newark
17. Romania	Romanian Cultural Institute	2005	EU, Turkey, Israel, USA	Yes	New York City
18. Russia	Russkiy Mir Foundation	2007	China, Cuba, EU, Israel, Central Asia, East Asia, USA	Yes	New York City, Washington, D.C.
19. South Korea	Korean Cultural Center	1991	USA, Japan, China, Russia, EU, Vietnam, Brazil, Argentina, India, Thailand, Mexico	Yes	Washington, D.C., Los Angeles, New York City
20. Spain	Instituto Cervantes	1991	Latin America, USA, EU, North Africa/Middle	Yes	New York City, Chicago, Boston, Seattle, Albuquerque

			East, South/Southeast Asia		
21. Switzerland	Pro Helvetia	1939	France, Italy, Egypt, S. Africa, China	Yes	New York City, San Francisco
22. Sweden	Swedish Institute	1929	France	No	N/A
23. Turkey	Yunus Emre Institute	2007	Italy, Jordan, Azerbaijan, Albania, Belgium, Japan, UK, Iran, Hungary, Poland, Northern Cyprus, etc.	No	N/A
24. United Kingdom	British Council	1934	Worldwide	Yes	Washington, D.C., New York City, Los Angeles
26. United States	Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs	1961	Worldwide	N/A	N/A

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