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MARTINUS EMGE

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# THE CULTURAL ATTACHE

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## PROBLEMS, OPPORTUNITIES AND RISKS OF AN AMBIGUOUS DIPLOMATIC ROLE

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"Non omnia possumus omnes"

### ON THE CONCEPT AND HISTORY OF THIS FUNCTION

The sociological professional office which we here intend to study in greater detail is, strictly speaking, relatively new. Some of its essential functions have been performed ever since the existence of something akin to foreign policy. For, a country's breakthrough into the international arena invariably depends on a number of auxiliary factors, some of which can be found in the cultural field. We cannot here deal with the controversial issue of what the phenomenon of culture encompasses, or with the difficult problem of defining and delineating "culture". It would, in any case, be recommended that a wider concept of *culture*, and thus of the cultural attaché's field of endeavour, be taken as the basis for practical work.

Within the framework of special state, or state-financed or-subsidized institutions, foreign cultural policy developed only in the last hundred years, mainly on the basis of one-time private initiatives. Strictly speaking, the position of cultural attaché, that is, the position of an official for various fields which is appended to diplomatic or consular missions abroad (for instance, a military or social attaché, a press or economic attaché) was introduced in our century. Like corresponding services for other specialized professional fields which work hand in hand with politics, they owe their emergence to a number of causal factors. Here one should

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include: the rapidly expanding duties of missions abroad, the awareness of the growing specialization of knowledge or the necessity for wider-based action under conditions of growing democracy. Strictly speaking, only a definite employee of the state foreign service can be termed a cultural attaché. However, as his competencies are often — and in places predominantly — the lot of persons who are not in a close and direct relationship with government missions abroad — which has its advantages, as is proved by the example of the British Council — a great many of the following conclusions can be applied to this wider circle of people (workers in cultural institutions, exchange services, etc.).

The editor of this special issue suggested the title "Ambiguous Role" for this contribution. Essentially, the roles which are here inferred have still to be explained in the light of their possibilities, and the dangers they conceal. Questions pertaining to this are continually brought up in most foreign ministries and lead to corresponding studies, new plans, and initiatives for reorganization. It seems that a generally applicable solution has not been found to this day. We should like here to try to define several views which could be said to have general value.

#### "SPECIALIST" VERSUS "GENERALIST"

The question which we are to deal with here is not merely one of the basic issues of foreign service, but also of some other, equally old and respectable professional spheres; namely, the problem lies in whether it is better to work with expressedly specialized forces, or, in accordance with longstanding principles not to do so. The problem of higher education and the medical sector (specialists) is sufficiently familiar. In relation to our subject this would mean: should one work in foreign cultural relations with a constantly growing number of cultural attachés and other specialized cadres, or should their duties be performed, as far as possible, by career diplomats. Let us now confront the supporters of both opposing argumentations.

A. (e.g. a career diplomat in the personnel and management department of a foreign ministry):

Personnel planning in diplomatic and other foreign services is extremely difficult. People repeatedly have to be sent out to various posts abroad, in shifts of several years, in order to resolve the necessary exchange of service abroad and work in the centre. This necessity causes constant and complicated chain reactions. With regard to these technical-organizational modalities

ties, it seems more feasible to employ predominantly forces which can be used in several fields. More specialized forces — be it in the cultural or in some other field — hamper the elastic and smooth planning and execution of personnel exchanges. Furthermore, such specialists usually have little understanding for the implementation of foreign political goals; as intellectuals, they tend towards superciliousness and self-will, and they lack solid experience in work. Finally, it is desirable for "career" diplomats to acquire know-how and knowledge of culture through practice.

B. (e.g. a historian who is in service abroad as a cultural attaché):

In the history of mankind one can discern a general tendency towards differentiation and specialization, in all fields of our societies. It is hence impossible in one sector, in this case in foreign service, to perpetually ignore this pressure of development. Consistently with this, the foreign service, too, has taken on specialists; this is a channel of development which will be supplemented and show a tendency to grow. (Analogously, let us say, to the development of the army.) If one were to take a long-term view of the classical and illustrious role of the "career diplomat", it would seem that he is doomed to extinction; it achieved its peak in the period between the Vienna Congress and the First World War, while it has already undergone considerable changes in the growingly strong industrial, and at least verbally "democratic" mass societies. If the foreign service of a country wants to keep abreast of the times, it must, apart from its existing corps of personnel specially educated and highly skilled in political work, have the necessary qualified experts for individual specialized fields. Only thus can a country participate in the concert of powers, or compete successfully (for some time, France has successfully been appointing education experts to its foreign cultural services). It is a matter of secondary importance whether these cadres are directly added on to diplomatic or consular services, or whether they are set up apart from them as complementary.

The divergent views given above must, naturally, be implemented within the framework of the possibilities which the foreign service of a given country has at its disposal, both in terms of material assets, and in terms of personnel. It is logical to assume that a small, agrarian country, with restricted financial means, with a still scarce academic stratum, and hence with a small diplomatic and consular service, will have to pass different organizational decisions from those

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of one of the so-called "world powers". Generally speaking, the planning of a small consular mission must always differ from that of a mammoth embassy. When larger embassies and consulates general are in question, it should without exception be decided that specialists be allotted to them.

#### SOME REQUIREMENTS OF THIS OFFICE

We have stated, then, that cultural officials in larger foreign missions should be specialized for one field. Here we know, of course — as we have pointed out on several occasions — that this so-called "cultural" field is an extremely wide one. And it expands increasingly, as is clearly seen, wherever general social relationships are taken into account. It is impossible in cultural work today to limit oneself to the so-called "beaux arts" or to "literature". Just as it is improbable for someone to be truly universally "educated" today, one cannot be an expert for all cultural fields. What is more, this is unnecessary. A cultural attaché should, above all, be required to possess a rough knowledge of the essential cultural facts about his country, its social-cultural history, and to be acquainted with its current social problems. In addition, he should definitely stand out in *one* field, the field in which he has already achieved something, and in which he is possibly still active, in a special branch which would allow him on scientific, literary or artistic ground, to be an equal and seriously-taken partner to corresponding scientists, writers or artists, either in his own country, or in the country whose guest he is. Consequently he should, at least in higher posts, himself occupy an outstanding position in the spiritual life of his country.

In order successfully to execute his duties, a cultural attaché should, furthermore, not only have an adequate knowledge of the language of the country he is in (the big powers are extremely negligent in this respect), but also acquire as speedily as possible a good working knowledge of the socio-cultural relations in that country. It would therefore be recommended — although it is not always possible to effect — for the new men being sent to a foreign country to spend some time previously specifically studying that country. It would be ideal — though difficult for bureaucratic reasons ("planning of posts") — if they could work for a certain time at their new posts parallel to their predecessors, so that the latter could familiarize them fully with their job. For it is impossible to learn everything from documents, or to check up on everything through them, particularly

when one is dealing with people, or with an atmosphere. It would be desirable for many positions in the foreign service for two officials to occupy the same post for a certain period of time, but the implementation of this idea would cause not only bureaucratic, but also human problems.

In conclusion of this short list, we should mention an affinity for making contacts, experience in management, and a capacity to sense political events and needs. It is almost impossible to work without the first ability, for in most cases the term of office abroad is short (it should be at least four years). Introverted scientists or eccentric artists would be of little use. An experience in management is also required, for: "Whoever says culture, says management, whether he wants to or not" (Adorno), and a diplomatic or consular mission is a part of the public administration. In large missions, a great deal can be done in this respect by experienced administrative officials or younger diplomats. And finally, though not least in importance: it is constantly being proved that a sense for politics is also required by a cultural attaché, for foreign cultural policy always remains a part of politics, regardless of how friendly its orientation may be towards cooperation and an exchange of experience. Cultural work, too, must always be governed by the objective political possibilities at home — and in the country where one is working.

#### AN ORIENTATION TOWARDS THE RECEIVER. AND DOUBLE TRACKS

An absolute requirement for success is that every cultural attaché must have an insight into the socio-cultural situation of the country he is working in. This brings us, among other things, to two important conclusions: the first is that all associates in foreign cultural policy, and especially those who are in service abroad, must be oriented towards the *receivers* of their work. This means primarily: it must first be established — as, by the way, all modern advertizing does — what general needs exist; only then can an attempt be made to meet them, if it is possible to do so. This may sound like something which is self-evident, but it is not so in practice. For even today individual centres and cultural attachés show a leaning towards a simpler approach, which used to be the custom, and which was based on planning at home to the detriment of effect: a unilateral, pre-fabricated and standardized "cultural good" is offered everywhere abroad at the same time; if there-

is any difference, it only lies in quantity. However, experience should amply have shown by now that although this method can quickly leave an impression of active cultural work abroad, its effect can only be wishful thinking. An orientation towards the receivers, which secures a far greater effect is, contrary to this: to select and offer, with full confidence, and from one's own fund of culture, that which is *hic et nunc* interesting abroad at the moment, and which can be used — even possibly to create favourable conditions for this ahead of time. Naturally, such a policy requires far more work, as a rule it is more expensive, and the cultural attaché and his centre at home must beat down the shadows of their own leanings and prejudices.

The other important conclusion which should be drawn from this orientation to the host-country is: the cultural attaché must work and think parallel — on two tracks — for instance, he should not merely see himself as a man who is promoting and spreading his own culture, but also as one who attempts to represent, or, less romantically, to import cultural values of the host-country into his own homeland. One who himself has something to offer rarely feels repugnance for, or a feeling of inferiority in the face of, something being offered to him. When a cultural attaché is truly able to adapt to the country in which he is working, when he understands and respects its existing values, exchange practically occurs of its own accord; for, he is glad to enrich his own country, and is prepared to assist this process. Admittedly, this last task demands an exceptional tactfulness. Namely, the diplomatic and consular missions in his homeland are the first which are called upon to perform this task — the cultural officials of the country which is his host are his opposite numbers. But one can extend an offer of help and establish contacts without competition. In many cases it is difficult to weigh and distinguish who gives and who receives, which is proved by the case of a professor who is a guest abroad, and who teaches and learns at the same time.

#### CULTURAL ATTACHÉS, POLITICAL PROPAGANDA AND PRESS WORK

Cultural attachés and other cultural workers abroad not infrequently have the unpleasant experience of being considered propagandists of a certain national policy, both by their own national administrations, and by those of the host countries, — the latter usually with great suspicion.

When dealing with the overlapping of cultural work and political propaganda, there are two facts which cannot escape detection: first — from the historical point of view — state cultural diplomacy has, without the slightest doubt emerged from the idea of its serving to promote one's own aims, which still remains today one of the focal points of foreign policy. To claim, as is sometimes done, that foreign cultural policy today is essentially only an exchange of experiences, a policy of development, or the harmless selfrepresentation of nations sounds euphemistic and idealistic, although there are notable insistences precisely on these mentioned properties. Furthermore, politics, including national politics, is not a "*sale metier*" (this was a bourgeois prejudice for some time), but it always has its own content. And, finally, it goes without saying that every cultural attaché who works in the political context of existing international relations must — as we have said before — take this into account.

On the other hand, however, it is important to clarify the following: many nations — often members of different political systems, holding controversial views and goals — must live together and cooperate on the international scene. In the field of culture, as in the "technical" sector which it is difficult to separate from culture (the formerly modern dichotomy "culture — civilization" proved increasingly inadequate), there are possibilities for human contacts in spite of political conflicts, which could even survive in wartime. The cultural sector of foreign service should, then, if possible, be excluded from politics, at least from current politics. In order to be able to do any work at all in the host country, every cultural attaché must strive to become a man who is met with a degree of trust. The tighter his superiors draw him in with the reins of politics, the more his ambassador or superiors at home fetter him with current political goals, the more he is exposed to the danger of not winning this trust, or of losing it. If, on the other hand, he is given enough room for action — which means that he may even criticize the policy of his country — in the long run he will serve his country best. Many cultural projects have already fallen through because of their emphatic political intentions.

The press service in foreign missions is often lumped together with cultural work, and done by the same person (a press and cultural attaché) — which is unavoidable in smaller embassies and consulates. As has already been stated, the negative side of this is the unfavourable link with politics, which work in the press invari-

ably places in the forefront. (Someone who must *ex officio* publicly defend or attack the conclusions of NATO or the Warsaw Pact can, through this action, undermine or destroy the capital of trust which is imperative if he is to effect cultural contacts and ideas.) Another negative feature is the fact that press work must always be done quickly, and almost always hurriedly. Thus press assignments are almost forcibly pushed forward as the priority field of endeavour of double officials, to the detriment of the cultural field. Such a person experiences the conflict between his two roles. It is therefore recommended that these two equally important fields of work be divided in the personnel sense, if possible, in all larger missions. It seems to me that the American information policy tends to narrow down the fields of culture, politics and press, in its permanent organizational structures, thus giving a negative example.

Press work, which relies on the quick, current transmission of news, and cultural work, whose fruits can only be seen after a longer period of time, partly only decades later, finally demand people who differ in temperament.

#### SOME OTHER SPECIFIC PITFALLS IN THIS WORK

We have so far indicated some dangers which, when dealing with cultural work abroad, stem from too close a relationship with political work, or with press work. We should like to indicate some other phenomena which might also threaten the work of the cultural attaché.

One should, first of all, point out the *tendency towards monopoly*. State, or state-supported cultural work abroad must always set out from the following fact: not only is it a relatively new field of endeavour, which has in most countries grown out of private initiatives, but also, even where it enjoys maximum state support, it still remains only one sector, as a rule a small sector, in international cultural relations. The scope of these sectors will, naturally, depend on more or less expressed affinities of their states towards monopoly. In any case, individual cultural officials are tempted to underrate everything which has evolved freely and privately, and sometimes even to suppress it in favour of their organized attainments. The channelling of international cultural activities in state-bureaucratic frameworks is undoubtedly on occasion the *conditio sine qua non* for further fruitful work. But this often also marks the end of valuable initiatives which promise a great deal, and which are smothered by bureaucratic red tape.



We have now come to another pitfall which stands in the way of the work of the cultural attaché: this is exhaustion in *administrative work*. We have already said that cultural work must also be administrative work. But the danger lurking here is that this partial function gradually engross the person, entirely, and make him a purely administrative clerk; first, in accordance with the saying: *quod non est in actis non est in mundo*, more and more work piles up at the desk, and there is less and less room for certain other activities. And a cultural attaché who can always be found at his desk in the embassy is certainly not fulfilling his duties. He must act as a personality outside the office and cultivate human relationships with the cultural elite of the host country; unfortunately, he will not often meet with the understanding of his service in this, nor will he be understood by his colleagues abroad. As is known, there is a dangerous tendency with a growing number of supporters, to consider predominantly "presence at the work post" and the number of sheets of paper filled out — only that which can be measured — as valuable.

If the importance of human relations is stressed for work abroad, one should in this connection indicate a third danger to fruitful cultural work, which stems from this. It relates particularly to members of diplomatic and cultural missions, and less to associates of cultural institutions abroad — and it is exhaustion in society at diplomatic "coctails", in a certain ambassadorial "elite" in what is known as the "high society" of the host country. Diplomatic society is everywhere made up of a relatively narrow circle of people, important for the exchange of knowledge among workers in diplomatic missions which work especially in political jobs, but which far less corresponds to the work of cultural attachés. Regardless of orientation, "high society" still remains only a section of society. In order really to get to know a country, the cultural attaché must move in the widest possible strata and circles of society, and in our — at least verbally — democratic times, he should orient himself to a certain width of action. This inevitably requires a certain number of eminent "multipliers", but he must not forget that these can, consciously or unconsciously, figure as gate-keepers, manipulating the flow of information to and from him.

It is unnecessary to say any more about the "boomerang" of national superiority. But yet another possible pitfall must be mentioned, although it far from completes this "black list": this is the risk of excessive identification with the host country on the one hand, and — this is the

other side of the coin — the weakening of contacts with one's own nation. Hence a too prolonged and uninterrupted stay doing cultural work abroad (about 10 years) can be just as harmful as too short a stay (3 years). This is why service abroad should occasionally be interrupted by service — or at least an informative visit — at home, for otherwise the cultural attaché could easily let the realities and problems of his own country drop out of sight. Hence it is not only good, but positively recommended, for the cultural attaché to work at home, too — not only in the foreign affairs centre, but also in certain cultural institutions.

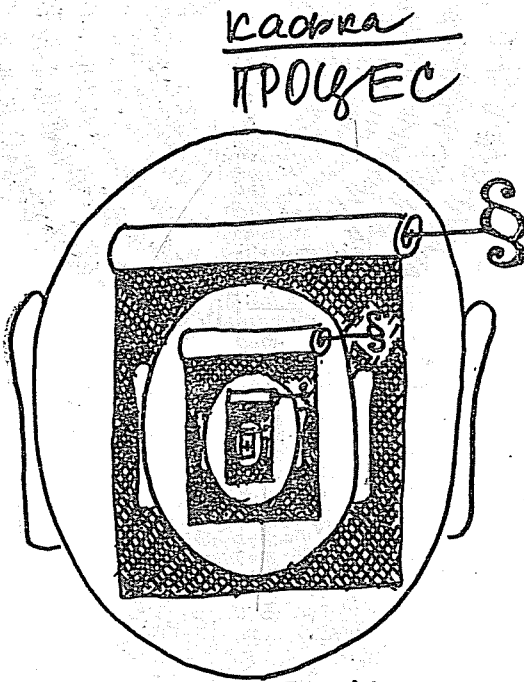
We have tried in six points to indicate the problems, opportunities and pitfalls of a specific office in the field of foreign policy. We have seen that we are dealing with important functions, whose effects are felt on a long-term basis, and which it is sometimes almost impossible to evaluate properly. They can be an important potential for the settlement of conflicts and the attainment of peace, something for which a great need is felt in days of crisis. However, those holding office in our field of work, as a rule still lack the status which is theirs in terms of significance. They often still figure only as marginal men within the foreign service, which was earlier the case with certain technical forms of armament in the army, which later proved to be of decisive importance. Not infrequently, we find younger diplomats holding down these posts, and fulfilling their tasks as a temporary duty, sometimes without real interest, as they believe that they should go on to some "higher" position.

So-called "*development policy*" — to say just a few additional words about it — has recently been attributed special importance, as it is believed — and in the deeper sense quite rightly — that every cultural endeavour outside one's own country essentially represents development policy. Nevertheless, experience soon showed that work in the "younger" states and nations with still insufficiently developed industrialization poses problems quite different to those in bilateral relations between older, more developed nations. One cannot, therefore, simply draw an equal sign between the roles of assistant in development and cultural attaché.

And one final note on the subject — international organizations (UNESCO, for instance) are increasingly supplementing their bilateral work in the field of culture with multilateral cooperation, they have even made possible a predominantly varied cultural work in general. The significance of these organizations, in spite of re-

peated errors, lies in their growing feeling of international togetherness among people, and in various expert needs. No one can say, at least in reference to the near future, that this will make bilateral cultural work redundant, and the role of cultural attachés unnecessary. Regardless of the forms and characteristics his office acquires, it will be necessary as long as nations exist.

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