

“ Cultural projection ”
One of the franco-american misunderstandings

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For fifteen years now I have worked on the theme of cultural exchange, specifically on what is called “cultural diplomacy.” In response to the invitation of the Alliance Française, I have decided to talk about a concept that is still very new, that of “cultural projection.” This idea came to me while reading a book written by one of the most highly regarded authorities on French cinema, Jean-Michel Frodon, which, unfortunately, has not yet been translated into English.

Frodon’s book was published five years ago in Régis Debray’s collection, “Le champ médiologique”, under the title, “*National Projection*,” with the subtitle, “*Film and nation*.” I would like to read to you one sentence that particularly struck me: “There is a kinship between the history of nations and the history of film. But this connection is not just historical, it is also ontological. Nation and film share a common nature: they exist, and can only exist, by projecting themselves.” In his analysis, Frodon inevitably studies the case of the United States and that of France, and this dual perspective is of particular interest to me. At a time when Franco-American relations are somewhat strained, I thought I would attempt a comparative analysis of the means which our two nations have used and continue to use to project themselves.

Frodon limits his analysis to cinema. Briefly, his theory is that the history of the United States and that of film are very closely connected. Remember that Blaise Cendrars had used Hollywood as a metaphor for the entire country. Not only did film contribute to the construction of the country (think of Griffith's famous movie, "*Birth of a Nation*, which came out in 1915), but it was also the privileged instrument used to project its image abroad.

As Frodon says, "If American cinema is the sum of the movies produced in the United States, then Hollywood's cinema is the projection of America." As early as World War I, America and its cinema were linked together by the common aim of "representing a horizon for the entire world, to become the land of myths for the present and the future."

France, on the other hand, offered during this same period a curious paradox. While it likely invented film thanks to the Lumière brothers, France's own cinema, as brilliant as it was, was barely projected abroad. Frodon is severe about this when he says: "France invented cinema to brighten the world with its light, but on the big screen France is only a small country".

This powerful metaphor of light, which Frodon uses often, led me to re-examine this question in a larger historical context. I wanted, in particular, to relate it to a word that is frequently used in France, yet practically impossible to translate – the word "rayonnement." This term, which I have studied in great detail for several years, is used by the French, in particular the political class, to define the policies used to spread France's image and culture abroad.

Today, then, I would like to explain what this desire to “project one-self abroad” through culture is: to then see how France attempts to reach this goal; and finally, (this is my principal concern), to compare the situation in our two countries. Let’s see if the proximity of the two concepts, “projection” and “rayonnement”, the former as it applies to the US and the latter as it applies to France, might shed some light on our similarities and our differences.

1. What is cultural projection?

11. Related concepts: cultural promotion, cultural power, cultural influence.

As always, when one tries to define a concept, it is helpful to explore related terms that are used in the same context; in this case, those that are to be found in the field of international cultural relations. Aside from “projection” and “rayonnement”, which I will come back to later, other commonly used terms are: “cultural imperialism” (generally used in a negative way), “cultural power” (related more to political science), “cultural influence” (a more neutral term), and finally “cultural promotion” (borrowed, it seems, from the vocabulary of business and economics). All of these words are widely used in diplomatic circles and in international organizations.

12. A concept opposed to cultural co-operation?

Two other terms “cultural exchanges” and “cultural cooperation” are also used in the field of international cultural relations. Both of them dominate current domestic and international policies.

If we take them literally, they are the exact opposite of the first group of terms. Projection (or even promotion) implies a one way relationship in which culture radiates outward from a central source. “Exchange”, on the other hand, (a term that comes to us from the world of business) implies reciprocity, and co-operation (a more activist idea), means that two people are theoretically equals and that each contributes equivalent resources to a common project.

At this point, I will just note that all these concepts are used loosely by the various players in international relations without being clearly differentiated. Who, then, are these players?

2. Players involved in cultural projection on the international scene

We may say that they fall into three main categories: political institutions, professionals, and civil society.

The professional category refers to commercial activity, and for the last twenty years or so, this is what is known in France as the “cultural industries” ; a concept that has caused many misunderstandings with the United States. Examples of these are film, both traditional and electronic forms of publishing, the recording industry, multi-media and even video games. Only recently has it become clear, especially in the World Trade Organization (WTO), how important a role these industries play in global exchanges.

The “civil society” category (a rather vague term, especially in France) refers to initiatives that are freely undertaken by individual citizens, whether or not under the auspices of an association or foundation. I also include in this category NGOs which are now increasingly involved on the international scene.

Finally, we have “political institutions”, which can be divided into three groups. On the historical level, which happens to be of particular importance in the current debate, there are the nation-states, whose instrument (for the conduct of international relations) is diplomacy.

We must, however, not forget the international as well as the intergovernmental levels (UNESCO and the European Union), and also local governments, whose role has grown in the second half of the twentieth century.

I would like to spend a few moments discussing the international cultural policies of a government, what is commonly referred to as cultural diplomacy. I often hear, especially here in the United States, that this “unidentified political or administrative object,” is a French specialty. Let’s just say that it has become a highly developed practice in Europe, and that France offers an important example of it.

The theory of the three “pillars” was actually first put forward, in 1964, by an American, Philip Coombs. According to him, diplomacy rests on three pillars: the political (or strategic, or military), the economic (or commercial), and, finally, the cultural. It is true that, as a good American, Coombs speaks not just of culture by itself, but, rather, of “culture and education.”

France has, in fact, developed a very elaborate system of cultural diplomacy. It is often said, and this is partly true, that the French system presents the prototype of a state organization that conducts its own cultural policy, both domestic and international. To give you some statistics, France spends 1% of its budget on domestic cultural and artistic policies, and 0.4% of its budget on international cultural, linguistic, scientific, and

technical cooperation. To this should be added local contributions. What is most striking, in the case of France, is its impressive network of schools around the world, and also of language institutes. And finally, there are the numerous artistic performances, like the ones organized by Louis Jouvet and his company in Cairo in the 50s . But contrary to the accepted view, France has always known how to use both direct and indirect methods. In this way, it has diversified its methods and played on both registers. The network of *Alliances Françaises*, with which you are very familiar here in the United States, is an obvious sign of a system that is much less state-controlled than is often claimed. Since the late 19th century, the state has shown increasing confidence in the various networks created by ordinary citizens. The Alliance Française has been joined, for example, by the “Alliance Israelite” and the “Mission Laïque.” At the height of state-sponsored anti-clericalism at the beginning of the 20th century, the French government worked with religious missions abroad on various cultural and educational programs. Here are a few numbers to help situate France’s current cultural diplomacy:

- \$1.6 billion annual budget for cultural policies and technical cooperation.
- 6,600 state employees working abroad on cultural cooperation
- 175 cultural institutes, 283 Alliances supported by the government, 370,000 adults who take French courses abroad, 160,000 students in the 265 French schools
- a state arts organization which promotes French art abroad (AFAA)

As these figures show, “national projection” is, for France, a very well organized state strategy. Before comparing the French and American systems, I would like to first identify the historical roots of France’s strategy.

3. Historical background of French cultural projection and dialectic synthesis of projection and cooperation

The French national projection is centered around four major points: language, Lumières, French revolutionary ideals, and “art de vivre.” At least two are so identified with France that they need not be translated, and three of them have an important historical dimension.

31. The founding French concept of “rayonnement”: the absolute monarchy, the philosophic movement of the 18th century and the French Revolution.

It seems to me that there is no doubt the French version of the concept of “projection”, which I described at the beginning of my analysis, the so called “rayonnement,” has its origins in the notion of absolute monarchy, and (in spite of the apparent contradiction) in the work of the philosophers associated with the Lumières. Everyone knows that Louis XIV chose the sun as the symbol of royalty. The architecture of the Ancien Régime, especially under Louis XVI, often includes buildings that “radiate” outwards. Interestingly, even though such philosophers of the Enlightenment as Voltaire and Diderot opposed the idea of absolutism, they used the same metaphor –of Lumières or lights -- to carry their ideas across Europe and eventually to the America of Benjamin Franklin. The implicit or explicit reference to the Lumières, later reinforced by the ideals of the French Revolution, led to two centuries of political and cultural activism that purveyed a specific message and that made France a sort of beacon that brightens the world. A study that I recently undertook of articles published in the newspaper “Le Monde” showed the

incredible vitality, among politicians of all stripes, of the concept of “rayonnement” and of the positioning of France on the international scene. More often than not, the term had cultural or linguistic implications.

32. Competition between European superpowers as colonial empires (1870-1914) and the war of languages.

If we examine the historical record, we shall see that it is particularly during times of political difficulties that France has tried to make the most of its international projection. The Alliance Française, for example, was created in 1883, just a few years after the defeat by the Prussians. The competition between the European colonial powers was ruthless. In the Mediterranean region, in Africa, and in Asia, the colonial wars were also wars of language. This field of battle is no longer so much in Western Europe (where French was widely spoken in the 18th century) as it is in Central Europe and other more distant regions. World War I also provided proof that wars take place in the field of ideas. It was in the middle of the war, in 1916, that the office of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in charge of the cultural relations was created, with Jean Giraudoux at its head. The rise of totalitarian regimes in Europe (Germany, Italy, Spain) led several democracies to develop their cultural relations agencies: it was in 1933, the same year that Hitler became German chancellor, that England created the British Council.

33. De Gaulle’s idea of “Le rang de la France”: the role of culture in the political positioning of France on the international scene and the construction of French cultural diplomacy.

It is Charles de Gaulle who should be credited with creating – after World War II – what we call today “cultural diplomacy”. De Gaulle’s goal was nothing less than the recovery of what he called “France’s rank” on the international scene. This was a major point of contention between France and the United States. Roosevelt was exasperated by the sudden collapse of France in 1940 and the installation of the Vichy government, as he was by de Gaulle’s idea of creating a so called “Free France”. De Gaulle’s reasoning was that France symbolizes certain values, in both language and culture. This led him to ask the Quai d’Orsay to institute a new department for cultural relations which would become a powerful tool for French diplomacy. In a short time, this agency accounted for a third of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs’ budget. The “trente glorieuses,” which refers to France’s thirty years of post-war economic development, were also thirty years of development in cultural diplomacy which soon included scientific and technical co-operation.

34. From decolonization to co-operation.

The 1960s were a period of decolonization, which was viewed as rather late by the American governments of the time. Another typically de Gaullian idea was to replace a colonial tie with a new relationship based on political, cultural, and linguistic cooperation. This link still exists today thanks, in particular, to the active network of “francophonie”. Certain people, such as the late Léopold Sédar Senghor – a francophone poet who was president of Sénégal, before becoming a member of the French Academy – are emblematic of this unique relationship. It was not until 1998 that this cooperation,

especially with Africa, took on a new identity, and France, always keeping open universal dialogue, built up its relations with the Southern countries in terms based less on history.

35. Domestic political consensus: what it implies

If it seems that I have lingered a bit on the historical background, it was to demonstrate that France's current attitudes and policies are partly inherited from its experience over the past two centuries. It seems to me that in terms of foreign projection, there is a strong agreement today among politicians. This consensus ties in directly with another concept, the notion of the particularity of French culture, what we might call the "exception." I know that this word sometimes annoys people outside of France, especially in the United States, but also some of our European neighbors. It has been said that, after its remarkable success from 1992 to 2000, the notion of cultural exception should have been replaced by "cultural diversity," a term that is much more acceptable to our allies. In the field of international diplomacy, this is obviously true; it is, however, less accurate when it comes to domestic politics. In a detailed study of the use of this term in the major newspapers, I found that political campaigns are the occasion for its periodic re-activation.

Unfortunately, we do not have enough time today to go into a detailed analysis of the term "cultural exception." To do this I would need at least a second lecture. I only want to point out that it is an interesting example of the approach that France uses to project itself abroad. It does not consist merely of trying to protect itself from the importation of foreign cultural goods, in particular American goods. It derives, rather, from the belief

that one carries a unique message for all of humanity: a complex mixture which is partly political message (democracy, human rights, etc...), as well as partly cultural and linguistic, all in the name of historical legitimacy. Related to this role, let us say even to this universal mission, another term – “decline” -- should be mentioned. This refers simply to the fear, which has surfaced periodically throughout history, that France’s cultural, or, rather, intellectual influence cannot live up to its ambitions. This argument was made in connection to French art and the Ecole de Paris, which were overtaken by New York after 1945. As Jean-Michel Frodon writes jokingly about film, it is the fear of no longer being a beacon, but, rather, a bedside lamp. It seems as if France needs this collective anxiety as an incitement to action. I mentioned earlier that the most activist French initiatives have been undertaken following a catastrophe. Perhaps this is a result of the French tendency to react rather than to act?

4. Points of contention with the American concept of cultural projection

At this point, and with respect, in particular, to the subject of a “universal mission,” I would like to suggest a similarity between France and the United States. I know that this is a difficult task, especially given the current atmosphere of anti-Americanism and Francophobia, and I certainly do not wish to add salt to any wounds. Several works have appeared in France over the past two years on the subject of what the essayist Eric Dior calls our “infernal couple.” The best of these analyses, written by Philippe Roger, is called *The American Enemy: A History of French Anti-Americanism*. It demonstrates, in particular, that our misunderstandings are not a recent phenomenon, but rather they date back to the time of Thomas Jefferson and George Washington. My personal view is that,

more than all other countries, France and the United States share a burning desire to project themselves. Of course, as Frodon reminds the reader, all countries project themselves, but they have not all expressed the same desire to convey a universal message. It's not so much a matter of considering oneself an exception, which many countries have done, but rather of believing that universality itself is a fundamental aspect of the country.

Let's take a look at the following diagram I put together, which compares the methods – whether political, cultural, or social – that are used by France and the United States to project themselves.

The two columns, the one on the left representing France and the one on the right the United States, are separated by a blue line that indicates three different types of relationships. Two dark blue arrows represent a parallel between the two countries, and although this leads to more or less open competition, there is no apparent .

This category comprises historical values that are projected. In the French example, I use the Lumières, which refers primarily to culture, but can also have political implications (encyclopédisme, birth of the experimental sciences, creative freedom, justice, tolerance, etc.). On the American side, within the same context of universal projection, I have placed ethical values. To this, could also be added faith in science, etc. The second line refers to political values. On the one hand, you have the achievements of the French Revolution – in particular, civil rights and equality. On the American side, you have democracy and human rights. It would be interesting to take this analysis one step further to see how, for example, in 1792 the United States began to question the Jacobin ideas that were being exported by France. For the purposes of our discussion,

suffice it to say that – in the message that they send abroad – both countries find it in their interest to promote those values which they have in common.

The next three lines of the diagram regroup, once again, shared elements for which each country uses, nonetheless, different, even opposed, methods. In France, we readily place these three all under the heading of culture. Since, however, this is where misunderstandings enter into play, I prefer to keep them separate.

For France, language is an essential component of its national projection. Up until the middle of the 19th century, France's culture was automatically projected because of its leading role among European countries. Once this ceased to be the case, an activist (and at times defensive) spirit propelled the elitists, and eventually also the government. Following decolonization, this form of projection was pursued through the institution of "la francophonie." The United States, on the other hand, has so far had the opposite experience. It did not have to be concerned with policies geared towards the development of its language since this occurred automatically as a result of its economic and political strength (similar situation to that which France faced, within a more limited geographic area, in the 18th century). Instead, the United States are more active in the fields of science and education, which is why it attracts a large number of foreign students in American universities.

A second point of divergence for the two countries is France's emphasis on "l'art de vivre", and the emphasis by the United States on art, film and entertainment. Analysis of this distinction is complicated by the difference that needs to be established between a "projected image" and a "received message." Cultural projection cannot be pictured as a purely mechanical operation: in other words, the intention of the projector is one thing

while the perception of the receiver is another. Still, in the case of France and The United States we can see how each one creates what the former calls “art de vivre” and the latter calls “the American way of life”. In the French example, everything falls under the all encompassing term “culture.” In America, there is a distinction between art and entertainment. Areas of potential disagreement (indicated in my diagram by a bolt of lightning) are easily recognizable in the current conflict within the World Trade Organization (WTO).

France claims the right to regulate culture through its government in order to protect itself from market abuses, from the supposed invasion of foreign cultural products (especially American), and to support its own fragile sectors such as the theater and the plastic arts. It is also argued that regulation allows the less fortunate to have more access to culture while also helping to stimulate artistic creation and art-related employment. France has argued this point within Europe and has won several battles, including quotas for European television programs, and to a lesser degree, the price of books and its concept of author’s rights. France has also insured that the European negotiator in Seattle, Doha, and Cancun not accept any liberalization of the market in the cultural sector, arguing that “culture is not a product like others.”

The United States, which is very concerned with the distribution of its cultural products abroad and which has the exact opposite approach, wages a battle to further liberalize trade, pointing out the role of the market in separating the good from the bad. They see a contradiction in France’s desire to project itself (and to count on the work of the different cultural industries such as film and music to accomplish this) and its insistence on protecting these same industries. Or worse, they believe the rules of the game are not

being respected. I will not enter into this debate at this time. Suffice it to say that both our countries consider this “projection” essential, and this can only exacerbate the conflicts.

5. Stereotypes to overcome

I would like to finish with three suggestions that might help to reduce the level of dispute among our two countries, and allow us to move beyond the inevitable stereotypes that are the result of cultural projection, as much on the side of the sender as of the receiver.

51. First, both countries’ approach to international relations should be more modest. We are not alone in our desire for cultural relations, and the time is ripe for us all to cooperate, especially with the countries of the southern hemisphere which have much to offer the world in terms of cultural diversity. Naturally, we should not be forbidden to promote our respective cultural goods which contribute more and more to the balance of trade. But the rules of the game must be supported by a larger consensus. This task is currently being undertaken by UNESCO, and it is a positive sign that the United States has rejoined this organization after having left it some years ago. The notion of a specific “model” of projection, as a kind of national trademark, does not seem to apply anymore in the 21st century.

52. French intellectuals, at least some of them, should stop systematically identifying cultural globalization with American industry, most notably the film industry. It is undeniable that the American film industry plays a dominant role in many countries. But cinema is also becoming much more diverse as television. In the fields of literature, scientific publications, music, and video games, other countries, whether European or Asian, play an increasing role in the international arena. You’ll notice the rank of Japan,

England, and Germany on the list of the major exporters of cultural goods. Also, you'll see that China has experienced a higher rate of growth than America. Let's look at the last thirteen years of Chinese cultural exports: they have gone from representing just 0.2% to 9% of the global market. Europe is not in such bad shape either. All of these countries should seriously rethink how they plan to allow developing countries to protect their cultures and to gain access to international markets. Globalization can offer many threats to cultural diversity, but this phenomenon is more complex than the usual forms of cultural imperialism.

53. To moderate the charge against France's systematic cultural protectionism and state control. On the American side, I think that it would be beneficial to stop systematically interpreting national cultural policies as a cover for protectionism. Yes, cultural protectionism exists, more or less supported by corporate interests; but it occurs just as much on one side of the Atlantic as the other, even if it takes on a different form. Furthermore, American culture's presence in France is not marginal, even though France is sometimes called protectionist. If you look at this table of movies playing in France, you will see, in fact, a rather stable balance between French and American films. On the other hand, there is still a lack of films from other countries. And yet, as you will see in this next chart, France is more open than any other country to foreign productions. Foreign movies are in yellow, American movies in red, and domestic films are in blue. A brief glance at these graphics shows that we must be careful about the assumptions that we make. It is not cultural policies as such, or even cultural promotion abroad, that

obstructs the exchange of cultural goods. The major stumbling blocks appear to be inadequate infrastructure, lack of education, poverty, intolerance, and prejudices.

I started my lecture by talking about film, and I have ended it with the same subject. This is not entirely a coincidence. Nor is it a coincidence either that the first conflicts between the French and the Americans over the subject of “cultural exception” related to film, rather than to music or books.

It is in fact the proof, and this is my conclusion, that our two cultures have in common the desire to be projected beyond themselves.