

Public Diplomacy and the Politics of Uncertainty, edited by Paweł Surowiec and Ilan Manor, Palgrave Macmillan, 2021, 386 pp., \$91.61 (hardcover), ISBN 978-3030545512

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Published amid the years of the Covid-19 pandemic, this edited volume interrogates the complex relationships between the theory and practice of public diplomacy and uncertainty as it is witnessed in the present moment of global politics. Uncertainty is identified by the editors as arising from such political dynamics as the rise of illiberal states in the international system and the social tensions and populist trends in a number of liberal-democratic countries. The former is foreseen to entail uncertain futures for the global political order, while the latter are feared as factors threatening the very foundations of the political order that were once a taken-for-granted certainty of liberal-democratic societies. The editors place a considerable stress on the post-truth society and the proliferation of digital hyperrealities (also addressed as post-reality) as crucial factors exacerbating these trends.

In presence of these premises, one expects to find in this book a collection of the kind of ethnocentric writings mostly concerned with the continued preservation of the liberal international order as well as the survival and success of liberal democracies in the much-worried-about context of declining U.S. global leadership and the supposed liberal-democratic reputational jeopardy resulting from the well-known and well-addressed populist phenomena being Donald Trump and Brexit. That is indeed what we find in three entries of the book: Steven Spike's discussion (Chapter 1) on the challenges faced by American public diplomacy amid the changing configuration of the contemporary international system; Nicholas Cull's analysis (Chapter 4) of British public diplomacy and reputational security after Brexit; and Ilan Manor and Corneliu Bjola's manifest call for escalating public diplomacy tactics to proactively

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counter the “assault on reality” that is usually assumed to be a trademark of Russia and other non-Western states (Chapter 5).

Yet, it may well be pleasantly surprising for the reader to find that this composite volume delivers much more, as it presents a remarkable host of non-Western and critical perspectives. In their chapter on Russia’s information strategy as crisis public diplomacy, Lucy Birge and Precious Chatterje-Doody (Chapter 7) emphasize the reciprocal character of the accusations of “information warfare” Russia and the West exchange with one another. Yan Wu, Richard Thomas and Yakun Yu (Chapter 2) apply textual analysis to the construction of Xi Jinping’s “Chinese Dream”, while Zhao Alexandre Huang (Chapter 8) appraises the human-to-human relationship-building dynamics of the everyday workings of a Confucius Institute in Africa. Both Chapter 2 and Chapter 8 assume the Chinese conception of public diplomacy as a valuable instrument to defuse international tensions, misunderstanding, and uncertainty and to support the recovery of China’s standing as a respected actor in the world. Although somewhat cursorily, Sara Kulsoom (Chapter 10) illustrates how rethinking India’s public diplomacy, which is yet anxiously and overwhelmingly driven by the fear of China’s growing influence in India’s neighborhood, may help the so-called “largest democracy in the world” to effectively navigate the great-power competition among Russia, China, and the United States in the South Asian region.

Beside these pluralizing non-Western perspectives, two critical innovations presented in this book are noteworthy. Christopher Miles (Chapter 6) traces the roots of public diplomacy – which occurs today in an inherently competitive post-truth informational environment – not in rationality and truth (the Habermasian public sphere) but rather in rhetoric and, to some extent, in falsification. This impressive discovery questions the long-held assumption that more information, in terms of quality (truthfulness) and quantity, decreases uncertainty thereby yielding public diplomatic benefit. Some empirical evidence reported by the contributor suggests that, in certain cases, the opposite is observed.

In her declared critical intervention concerning the very public diplomatic logics that are instantiated in the everyday conducts of three selected cases of American exchange diplomacy, Laura Mills (Chapter 11) mobilizes the critical concepts of governmentality and performativity to reveal how non-American (non-Western) exchange participants are subjected to hierarchical power relations embedded in the public diplomacy programs. These inhere in the conducts of exchange diplomacy and prescribe the participants to simultaneously perform the fixed subjectivities of (domesticated) foreign Others (as “cultural ambassadors”) and good cosmopolitans. These Orientalist and essentializing practices betray the very clichés of cosmopolitanism, openness, and inclusivity that inform much discourse of cultural exchange. Mills’ critique discloses possibilities for a radically new and empowering vision of public diplomacy.

These two critiques markedly stand in tension with other entries in the same book. First, Mills’ radical critique can be elegantly applied, as it appears to the reader, to the case of the Confucius Institute in Africa discussed by Huang in Chapter 8, as it displays similar discourses

of “cultural inclusiveness” and “respect for cultural diversity” which are problematically coupled with government practices (for instance, in terms of “self-censorship”) and essentialist Chinese/African binaries. Second, Miles’ consideration of untruth as a fundamental element of public diplomacy contrasts with the advocacies for counter-disinformation measures advanced not only by Manor and Bjola in Chapter 5 but also by Alicia Fjällhed in her chapter focusing on Sweden’s public diplomacy (Chapter 9).

The unique and outstanding value of this recently published book lies indeed in the overall theoretical tensions underlying its various contributions. The most thought-provoking tension arguably concerns the normativity of truth from the perspective of public diplomacy. While some contributors (notably, Manor and Bjola and Fjällhed) admittedly endorse public diplomacy’s normative commitment to truth under conditions of post-truth and post-reality, other authors (including Birge and Chatterjee-Doody and Miles) seem to contemplate the role of untruth in advancing the interests of public diplomacy. This tension points to a lively scholarly debate and a praiseworthy deal of (self-) critical and scientific rigor.

Although some arguments that can be found in specific chapters, such as Kulsoom’s optimism about India’s political and cultural brand potentially outshining the Chinese competitor, may appear as facile prescriptions supported by minimal empirical evidence and logical reasoning, the volume offers timely and engaging insights into some pathbreaking advancements in public diplomacy research, challenging the assumedly positive correlation of public diplomacy and truth as well as some fundamental tenets of the existing public diplomacy paradigms. It is therefore a must-read for any scholar and practitioner truly committed to the field of public diplomacy. The fact that the most pluralizing and innovative contributions are offered by early-career academics (mostly PhD candidates and lecturers) promises exciting developments to come.

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