

DH-Nordic conference, Helsinki, March 7-9, 2018

*Charting the 'Culture' of Cultural Treaties: Digital Humanities approaches to the history of international ideas*

Benjamin G. Martin

Department of History of Science and Ideas, Uppsala University  
in collaboration with HUMlab, Umeå University

Cultural treaties are the bi-lateral or multilateral agreements among states that promote and regulate cooperation and exchange in the fields of life we call cultural or intellectual. Pioneered by France just after World War I, this type of treaty represents a distinctive technology of modern international relations, a tool in the toolkit of public diplomacy, a vector of "soft power." A comparative examination of these treaties can identify their role in the history of public diplomacy and in the broader history of culture and power in the international arena. But these treaties can also serve as sources for the study of what the historian David Armitage has called "the intellectual history of the international." In this project, I use digital humanities methods as one part of a multi-method effort to use cultural treaties as a historical source with which to explore the emergence of a hegemonic concept of culture in twentieth century international society. Specifically, the project will investigate the hypothesis that the culture concept, in contrast to earlier ideas of civilization, played a key role in the consolidation of the post-World War II international order.

I approach the topic by charting how concepts of culture were given form in the system of international treaties between 1919 (when the first such treaty was signed) and 1972 (when UNESCO's Convention on Cultural Heritage marked the global consolidation of the culture concept). The uses of a concept as widespread as "culture" can of course be charted through many other textual sources. But as a means of interrogating the uses of the culture concept in state-to-state relations these treaties are a uniquely valuable source. The treaties used concepts like civilization and culture in their carefully negotiated wording. As binding agreements under international law, such treaties regulated cross-border cultural flows and forged networks of exchange and obligation. These treaties are an interesting source, moreover, precisely because these texts were produced by diplomats, rather than cultural producers or "intellectuals" in a traditional sense. Examining cultural treaties allows us to study the moment when diplomats and statesmen from two (or more) countries agreed on the nature and content of the "culture" they planned to exchange. That moment of negotiation was also, I submit, an important moment for the transnational, trans-linguistic articulation of concepts.

In this project, I study these treaties with the large-scale, quantitative methods of the digital humanities, as well as with the tools of textual and conceptual analysis associated with the study of intellectual history. The project seeks, in other words, to conduct what Franco Moretti has called a "distant reading" of the treaties, as well as a close reading of a selection of these documents (and of archival material related to their preparation). In my paper for DH Nordic 2018, I will outline the topic, goals, and methods of the project, focusing on the ways we (that is, my colleagues at Umeå University's HUMlab and I) are approaching the "distant reading" part of this study of global intellectual history.

We explore the source material offered by these treaties by approaching it as two distinct data sets. First, we conduct quantitative analysis of the basic information, or "metadata" (countries, date, topic, etc.) from the complete set of treaties on cultural matters between 1919 and 1972, approximately 300 documents. Our source for this information is the World Treaty Index ([www.worldtreatyindex.com](http://www.worldtreatyindex.com)). We ask several questions of this data. Which countries signed the most cultural treaties? At what historical moments were cultural treaties more or less frequently used? How does

the quantity of cultural treaties compare with that of other treaty types, like trade treaties, or treaties regulating (only) educational or scientific exchange? This data can also help identify the emergence of networks, or in some cases webs, of bilateral cultural treaties. Visualizing these networks (using tools such as Cytoscape or Gephi) will allow me to pose interesting questions by comparing them to any number of other transnational systems. How, for example, does the map of cultural agreements compare to that of trade treaties, military alliances, or to the transnational flows of cultural goods, capital, or migrants?

Second, to chart the development of concepts, we will observe the changing use of key terms through quantitative analysis of the treaty texts. The treaty texts (digital versions of most which can be found online) will be limited to four subsets: a) Britain and France, 1919-1972; b) India, 1947-1972; c) the German Reich (1919-1945) and the two German successor states (1949-1972); and d) UNESCO's multilateral Conventions (1945-1972). This selection is designed to approach a global perspective while taking into account practical factors, such as language and accessibility. By treating a large group of cultural treaties as several distinct text corpora and, perhaps, as a single text corpus, we will be able to explore the treaties using several textometric methods, including measuring word frequencies, identifying co-occurrence, and keyword extraction. This quantitative analysis should allow us to map the use of important concepts and phrases over time. Is it the case that "civilization" drops out of these documents, to be replaced by "culture"? Likewise, measuring the similarity of treaties to one another may enable us to isolate which treaties acted as models that were later copied by other nations. Since the creators of each text are countries (and thus physical places) we can chart the changing word usages geographically. Using named-entity recognition might allow us to further link the texts to maps through geo-parsing. Spatializing the data allows us to ask which countries pioneered the transition to "culture" in international relations. In relation to which other countries did they do this? Can we identify particular groupings of countries (by continent, or by political ideology) that used the culture concept in similar ways?

Finally, we will seek to identify themes in the treaty texts through topic modeling. Textual data from these sources is of high enough quality for automatic part-of-speech tagging, enabling elimination of non-essential words as well as stemming (grouping together various forms of a word that share the same root). These preparations will enable us to run a more powerful, targeted form of text analysis through natural language processing tools like MALLET ([mallet.cs.umass.edu](http://mallet.cs.umass.edu)). Over all, our use of text analysis seeks (a) to offer insight into the changing usage and meanings of concepts like "culture" and "civilization" in international documents; (b) to identify which areas of cultural activity were regulated by the treaties over time and by world region; and (c) to clarify whether "culture" was used in a broad, anthropological sense, or in a narrower sense to refer to the realm of arts, music, and literature. This aspect of the project raises interesting challenges, for example regarding how best to manipulate a multi-lingual text corpus (with texts in English, French, and German, at least).

In these ways, the project seeks to contribute to our understanding of how the concept of culture that guides today's international society developed. It also explores how digital tools can help us ask (and eventually answer) questions in the field of global intellectual history.