

On cultural diplomacy: Marc Fumaroli, French cultural policy, and the humanities

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Abstract

This paper contributes to the debate on cultural diplomacy by revisiting the work of Marc Fumaroli. While he was recognized as an important commentator on French cultural policy, we claim that his work also offers an essential perspective on cultural diplomacy. Fumaroli's work intersects with several important themes typically explored in cultural diplomacy. The first section of this paper engages with Fumaroli's general perspective on cultural policy. The second section discusses soft power and transnationalism from a historical perspective. The third section revisits his critique of Paris's cultural aspiration since the 1980s, and its global rivalries for cultural prestige. We argue that Marc Fumaroli provides both an evaluation of and elements of inspiration for French cultural diplomacy. His perspective is unique in the way that it brings to light the historical importance of humanities and literature in cultural diplomacy. This paper is an invitation to consider intellectual history as part of the body of contributions necessary to engage more fully with the debates on cultural diplomacy.

Keywords

cultural diplomacy, soft power, France, cultural policy, Fumaroli, cultural history

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Introduction

Anyone who studies cultural policy will inevitably be introduced to France's cultural policy. In cultural policy research, and particularly in comparative research, France is used as a heuristic model to understand the basic components and mechanics of cultural policy (Poirrier, 2003; Rius-Ulldemolins et al., 2019). The French model of cultural policy – in contrast with an American or a British model, for example – is described using a number of distinctive characteristics: a strong presence of the state; a Ministry of Culture as a unit for policy implementation and coordination; and a history of reflection and strategies to support cultural participation, dating back to the 1960s (Ahearne, 2003; Donnat, 2003; Looseley, 2014). Despite consistent critiques of its difficulties with inclusion and cultural participation (Brunel, 2012; Germain-Thomas, 2020; Glevarec, 2016), French cultural policy would be ranked by many as historically successful. Therefore, one might assume that French people would have a rather positive attachment, perceiving French cultural policy as deeply rooted in progressive and humanistic views on the arts and heritage. However, few French people have been so clearly and vehemently critical of the French model of cultural policy than has Marc Fumaroli. His critique is not only one that is systemic but also one that is concerned with inconsistencies and challenges: Fumaroli's take on French cultural policy aims at its essence and *raison d'être*.

The late Marc Fumaroli was an expert in rhetorics and a professor at the Collège de France, where he held a named research chair, titled Rhetoric and Society in Europe (16th and 17th centuries), and in 1995 was elected as one of the so-called Immortals of the French Academy. Over the course of his career, the bulk of Fumaroli's work situated him as not only a rhetorician but also a historian of cultural ideas, literature, and humanities within France and across Europe. Fumaroli was a well published author who wrote more than 30 books, many of which were translated and read in English: *The Poet and the King* (translated in 2002 by the University of Notre Dame Press); *The Republic of Letters* (translated in 2018 by Yale University Press); and – one of his most influential books – *When the World Spoke French* (translated in 2011 by the New York Review of Books). Many cultural policy researchers have engaged with his work, particularly through his book *L'État culturel: Essai sur une religion moderne* (1992a) – a title that Jeremy Ahearne (2002) translated in its short form, *The Cultural State*, in his review of intellectuals and cultural policy in France. *The Cultural State* offers an incendiary account of French cultural policy, contributing to the discourse that both challenges the myths of André Malraux's cultural policy and contends with the new turn in French cultural policy that emerged from the time of François Mitterrand's rise to power in the 1980s. Fumaroli's critique of French cultural policy is often misunderstood and mistaken for a mere conservative attack on the policy's democratization rationale established in the 1960s. However, this is an overly simplistic and reductionist view of complex conceptualizations. To such accusations, Fumaroli offered a response himself. In his view, French cultural policy in the 20th century results from a political consensus on democratization that was shared by the technocratic right and by a populist left (Fumaroli, 2019). This view of French cultural policy, Fumaroli argues, does nothing to support the excellence of French culture.

Fumaroli's position developed in opposition to the coterie of contemporary artists who thrived in the context of French cultural policy and on the forms of cultural expression that are far from inclusive and often perceived by the general public as hermetic. The new Ministry of Culture imposed itself as a ministry of creators, one that was designed to serve the sectoral interests of cultural workers. According to Fumaroli, the social status of the artist in society has been the result of hard-fought cultural battles with the old guild system in France and across Europe – fights to unleash creation and to assert the distinctive figure of the artist. This battle ended with a new cultural policy that transformed what Fumaroli (1992a) saw as a heroic cultural figure – the artist – into a weak and vulnerable precarious cultural worker that needs public support and attention. While harsh, this critique nonetheless brings to light how the figure of the artist has been socially reconfigured into the contemporary cultural worker. Here, particular emphasis is placed on the implication of the word *worker* because it brings Fumaroli's critique into dialogue with the sociology of culture and the sociology of labour, where artistic practice is understood as a form of work characterized by economic and structural precarity (Menger, 2003, 2010).

Fumaroli's critical views on French culture are informed by liberal social and political traditions. From his perspective, the inconsistencies of French cultural policy and its inclusionary model have failed in their implementation and, thus, failed in their objectives. The cultural policy that emerged in France in the 20th century separated arts and heritage from the Ministry of Education, bringing the oversight of libraries, museums, historical monuments, the Academy, the School of Fine Arts, and the many other cultural institutions under the new Ministry of Culture. This emergent policy was, for Fumaroli, antithetical to a long tradition of cultural support from state and society that was predicated on the cultivation of the self and on the current policy and its administrative structure – it dissolved the traditional link between education and culture in France, inhibiting France's cultural fruition. Fumaroli, however, asserts that the success and global appeal of French culture in the 17th and 18th centuries cannot be attributed to state involvement alone; it depends, as well, on philanthropic patronage.

This assertion offers a sharp contrast with common views entertained about the French model that describe it as being primarily driven by the state. Considering Fumaroli's incisive viewpoint seems incompatible with what has come to be referred to as the French model of cultural policy, what can such an iconoclast teach us about French cultural diplomacy?

In recent years, the literature on French cultural diplomacy has grown quite significantly. An important body of literature developed around the role of the Alliance Française and of the French language in cultural diplomacy (Chaubet, 2006; Dubosclard, 2001). Similarly, the literature has developed quite significantly around the place of French museum diplomacy (Alcantara and Peyre, 2021; Cai, 2013; Guéraiche, 2018; Peyre, 2020). Moreover, a recent publication coordinated by François Chaubet et al. (2024) provides one of the most important historical overviews of existing programmes and policy instruments in support of French cultural diplomacy. Recontextualizing the work of Fumaroli contributes to the debate. While he was recognized as an important commentator on French cultural policy, we claim that his work

offers an essential perspective on cultural diplomacy. We argue that revisiting Marc Fumaroli's insights and contributions not only helps us approach French cultural diplomacy using previously underexplored critical lenses but also provides us with broad themes that can help better situate French cultural diplomacy at the intersection of ideas and intellectual history.

Otium, studium, and cultural governance

The debate about literary and artistic merit, referred to as the Quarrel of the Ancients and the Moderns, could serve well as the backdrop for situating Marc Fumaroli's critique of French cultural policy and his critiques and hopes for French cultural diplomacy, by extension. With his emphasis on the importance of engaging with the past; his knowledge of the canons of French literature and visual arts; and his insistence on the significance of architectural education – for which he would certainly have liked to see more respect for classical models – it would be easy to situate Fumaroli as one who sides with the Ancients. In fact, he does not challenge this characterization, discernible in some of the work that synthesizes his contribution of intellectual thought (Fumaroli, 2019). While the label may fit, it would be limiting to confine his contribution to the age-old Quarrel. To better understand how Fumaroli is best positioned in the cultural diplomacy context, we need to engage with key ideas and concepts that best serve to explain how Fumaroli approaches culture and, by extension, cultural policy.

The first notion that can help us situate the academician's view of culture lies in the principle of *otium*. Rooted in the ethos of Roman Antiquity, the notion of *otium* refers to a disinterested leisure, a cultivation of the self through the joy of learning. Delving into his work, we can also appreciate Fumaroli's interpretation of – even insistence on – some of the dimensions that comprise the *otium*. In his work, the *otium* is not merely a disinterested leisurely life of the mind exercised by a will to learn about and engage with the world and by a disposition to welcome beauty and to cultivate a sense of aesthetics; rather, the *otium* is contemplative as much as it calls for an ethics of responsibility (Fumaroli, 1991). According to Fumaroli, we have a responsibility to engage with the past and to find those of its artists, artworks, and manifestations most evocative of genius and talent. Such a practice is ideally interdisciplinary in his views.

From this general principle, Fumaroli's ideal mode of cultural participation is one consistent with the practices of the amateur. In his work, Fumaroli pleads for intensive cultural participation with the idea that such participation will enhance one's cultural dispositions. With this conviction in mind, Fumaroli challenged French cultural policy because it was never truly inclusive; it never made a real effort to offer everyone the possibility to cultivate the capacity to engage with what many consider canon. For Fumaroli, the decay of formal artistic education is a factor that contributes to exclusion: contemporary arts are too often esoteric and, thus, become a space reserved for the few. In the 20th century, French cultural policy has not served the arts but has contributed to the conditions working against the development of the amateur as the ideal cultural participant, and, therefore, the ideal public of the arts. Decades after these important debates on democratization of culture, the important question of education as a tool for inclusion has

resurfaced in many practices and research agendas using the concept of audience development (Mohr et al., 2024; Thomas, 2015). What is striking is that this current research may not entertain ideas that are, in principle, fundamentally different from those expressed by Fumaroli. The education system, according to Fumaroli, ought to be the place where a dedication to *otium* is perceptible, offering the resources necessary to enable cultural practices. It is true that the type of cultural education desired by Fumaroli leaves an important place for contemplation of the past. This is by no means a passive understanding of education; rather, it is a system that ought to sustain a sense of curiosity in learning in an engaging manner.

Cultural governance is a second notion in the monumental body of work left by the scholar that offers a space to reflect on his approaches to culture and, therefore, cultural policy. Fumaroli's perspective on cultural governance is articulated through the complex architecture of Western cultural history and its division between spiritual (*sacerdotium*) and temporal (*imperium*) power. In Fumaroli's work, the *studium* – that is, university, academies, and other institutions of knowledge – emerges in his conceptual configuration as a mediator between the dualistic powers, indicating the *studium* is a force essential for cultural governance (Fumaroli, 1992a). In this historical outlook, cultural policy has been governed by the interplay of these three interdependent forces. Furthermore, in a number of his works, we identify the aggregate elements for a theory of philanthropy. Fumaroli's views on philanthropy are influenced by liberal political philosophy in that he gives great attention to education and taste formation. From his writing, it is clear that Fumaroli (2019) saw a lot of greatness in the American tradition of cultural philanthropy, insisting that philanthropy can play a role in support of not only culture but also the education and formation of taste in the arts. Indeed, Fumaroli went so far as to say that philanthropy was itself an art.

In sum, the Fumarolian view of cultural policy revolves around the centrality of education. Cultural education is a practice; one tied to an ethics of self-cultivation. In principle, the educational system ought to support cultural participation; it is the educational system that should theoretically sustain greater cultural engagement. In his views and in his ideal system, the humanities are brought back into the equation and are made significant and essential to the life of the arts. On this point, Fumaroli's views highlight the alienation of not only philosophy but also the humanities more broadly in the sphere of arts and culture, a point that merits discussion in an era when many are trying to reconnect the arts with sciences and technology. For Fumaroli, the *studium* is not only a vital force for the fruition of culture, but it is also what secures its autonomy from the potentially abusive intrusions of the *sacerdotium* and the *imperium*. These notions constitute not only his architecture of cultural policy, but also his views on cultural diplomacy.

Soft power

In the repertoire of cultural diplomacy research, the notion of soft power is an interesting one. Soft power implies the idea of cultural might: the global attraction of a given culture and the appetite for its artistic and cultural production (Gallarotti, 2011; Nye, 1990; Rothman, 2011; Zamorano, 2016). As such, soft power facilitates international relations,

supports power and political projects, and creates conditions favourable for a state's fruition. However, soft power is a cultural charisma of a sort that cannot be strictly dictated, and while it can be entirely engineered, it is often assumed that it cannot be cultivated under pressure. Although countries and nations are actively working to promote their soft power, this may take time and necessitate external recognition to be effective. In other words, it would seem that soft power is not just something that a nation claims for itself, but something that must be attributed externally. Authenticity may be a determining factor in constructing a sense of legitimacy around soft power, and this may require time and effort.

In 2001, Fumaroli published one of the most authoritative contributions to the history of rhetorics, and, arguably, one of the most compelling monographs written on cultural diplomacy. Translated 10 years later in English under the title *When Europe Spoke French*, Fumaroli's book offers a convincing perspective on the climax of French culture and civilization, an era that he situates in the 17th and 18th centuries. In his historical imagination, the 17th century laid the foundation for the globalization of the French language and culture in the 18th century.

French soft power results from social and cultural forces, some of which were aided by policy. With that in mind, three institutions underpinned the infrastructure that made French language and culture truly global in the 17th and 18th centuries: the creation of the Academies, the political consolidation of the French language, and the art of the Parisian conversation. In 1539, the Edict of Villers-Cotterêts established the French language – the language of the King of France – as the language of the Kingdom. However, the French language would only gain its singular prestige under Louis XIV. Fumaroli writes:

Over two generations, Malherbe's lesson, the rise of the Parisian conversation, the creation of a highly symbolic Academy, the apparition [...] of our first classical authors, all coincide with the military and diplomatic affirmation of the kingdom, to give to the French, and in the first place to its authors, the certainty that the language of the king is in phase to become the rightful inheritor of Latin, and establish itself as a literary institution in its own right. (Fumaroli, 1994, XXXV)

In this passage, Fumaroli renders visible how political forces legitimized the French language domestically to consolidate its use and value in the arts. The above-mentioned literary institutions were shaped by both the cultural and the political spheres, thus mutually serving their own legitimation.

Among French linguists and experts in rhetorics, Malherbe carried a vision and a doctrine for the French language that influenced some of its epurations and established levels of language in a manner that shapes new literary uses. For some, Malherbe's doctrine brought purity and clarity in French poetry and literature (Fumaroli, 1981), from which there have emerged not only distinctive authorial contributions – writers who could be interpreted in the sociology of culture as institutional entrepreneurs – but also entire genres. A notable example is the French conversation (or Parisian conversation) genre, which gave heft to the French language and to its cultural recognition throughout Europe. This literary genre was described by Fumaroli during his 1991–1992 course at

the Collège de France as an 'essayism of the general and liberal knowledge' (Fumaroli, 1992b: 527). Put another way, the French conversation is a means to not only engage artistically with masterful uses of the language but also to discuss a range of topics from human nature and habits to philosophy.

The French conversation is an epistolary genre, an art form whose harmony is created through the beauty of expression – mobilizing narratives, anecdotes, maxims, and even poetry – in pursuit of reciprocal agreement (Fumaroli, 1998a). Again, in his characterization of the genre, Fumaroli explains how the conversation – conducted through correspondences – is itself a demonstration of an individual's eloquence and a medium that sustains friendship and a vector of diplomacy. Moreover, the undeniable importance of the French conversation was crystallized through its function as a tool to express talent and as an educational component necessary to form the wisest and most brilliant minds of Europe. According to Fumaroli:

French conversation, in French, indispensable attribute of any European education, had become the mediator of European equilibrium, and an indispensable instrument to shape and dose compromises to hold together and dynastic interests through different court intrigues. Used internally in France, the conversation became a high precision and delicate diplomatic instrument to tame conflicts between different constituent jealousies against the crown; it was then furthered into a tool in the dynastic, political, and military contests of the whole continent. (Fumaroli, 1994: 304–305)

The French conversation is an educational and spiritual practice, one which is perfectly aligned with the traditions of the *otium* and the *studium* so central to Fumaroli's perspective on cultural governance. The French conversation as a literary genre is also described as a tool in the formation of the self as an instrument of subjectivation, and, as such, coincides with Fumaroli's ethics of culture. Fumaroli takes it a step further, suggesting the conversation surpasses the individual by portraying it as a relational instrument in support of the *ars diplomatica* in Europe. Fumaroli's cultural diplomacy provides the basis for the nuanced understanding of the French conversation's dual function. The first function is as the desirable object of cultural relationship; it is the aesthetically pure, pleasing, and novel literary genre that is desired and that creates such interest across the European courts. The second function of the French conversation is as the conduit, the manner, and the medium of an elevated pursuit of diplomatic affairs.

Fumaroli's view on soft power reads as follows: 'The clear-cut distinction that we are often trying to make today between culture and diplomacy makes obstacle to our understanding of the 18th Century, [...]' (Fumaroli, 2001: 11). In other words, culture is the relational apparatus of excellence for politics in the 18th century, far exceeding the relational potential of commerce. Furthermore, cultural relations are key to understanding how European nations tried to maintain a stable peace. The performing, literary, and visual arts each served as indirect publicity for the French crown. Moreover, Fumaroli asserts that '[in] ways similar to America today, without any cultural policy or linguistic policy, the France of the 18th Century and its language were simply contagious and irresistible, [...]' (2001: 18). The deep social and cultural forces at play to support culture

also serve to reinforce military, political, and commercial might. The sources of soft power, however, are to be found in the culture of the arts and humanities.

On a topic related to language, it appears that Fumaroli does not believe much in the power of an institutional francophonie that aims to defend the French language across the globe. For Fumaroli, the institutional francophonie is not what will bring back the global appeal of the French language. Once again, true to his method, he believes that the current appeal of the French language remains rooted in the legacy of the 17th and 18th centuries. According to Fumaroli, it is consequential that French is spoken in Québec, Morocco, Burgundy, and Madagascar, but soft power is to be found beyond that franco-sphere, in the United States and in Japan, for instance. He writes, 'if French can be more than ever an object of desire, it is for having been able to create the conditions favorable to a liberal conversation' (Fumaroli, 2019: 748). Revisiting the art of conversation, understanding the underlying conditions that made French a global and appealing language, and understanding the role of the education system and its capacity to convey cultural values, are the necessary conditions that could help France rise, once again, to a global appeal. By that, Fumaroli is not a detractor of the francophonie as a transnational cultural space but perhaps a sceptic of the capacities of an institutional and political francophonie as developed over the last four decades.

Transnationalism and Europe

Europe plays an important part in the architecture of Fumaroli's theorization of international cultural relationships. The Europe studied by Fumaroli was defined by new patterns of cultural relations that, in turn, rendered new forms of cultural relationships. Europe is the space for which Fumaroli articulates his thoughts on diplomacy and does so in a way that extends the notion of cultural diplomacy into a different conceptual territory. Likewise, Europe as a theme is also revisited by Fumaroli using contemporary lenses, with the promises and weaknesses of a Europe as it was discussed in the 1990s.

Fumaroli's work is a history of the intellectual thoughts of the 17th and 18th centuries. His work articulates key notions reminiscent of the literature on transnationalism and transnational relationships that are well-known to researchers studying cultural diplomacy. In *La diplomatie de l'esprit* (1998a), Fumaroli discussed, in part, how the state facilitated the rise of the French conversation as a literary genre. He documented – as in *Trois institutions littéraires* [Three literary institutions] – how the state amplified the symbolic value and the legitimacy of the French language and the French conversation. However, Fumaroli's work also illustrated a fine network of creative relationships spreading throughout Europe, uniting European authors culturally and spiritually. Thus, while the French conversation was facilitated by state power, it became a double-edged sword that liberated discussion and freed tongues; it would eventually be credited for accelerating the demise of the French monarchs. Therefore, the diplomacy of spirit – or the diplomacy of minds portrayed in Fumaroli's work – is not strictly defined along the lines of state-sponsored cultural relationships; rather, the diplomacy of minds conveys a much broader idea of cultural relationships, where intellectuals associate and engage at will with the intention to connect and create a community. However, the notion and historical

reference to the Republic of Letters is undoubtedly one of Fumaroli's clearest engagements with a transnational view of cultural relationships.

The Republic of Letters is an institution in the broadest sense that can be linked to the literary practices of the Italian Renaissance; the *Respublica Litteraria* of 15th-century Florence; and friendships of spirit between Petrarca, Boccaccio, and Salutati (Fumaroli, 2015). In Fumaroli's work, the Republic of Letters is both an informal institution and a striking metaphor of intellectual life. The structure of the Republic of Letters is that of an antique forum, a new type of senate where members co-opt citizens, inviting them to partake in the intellectual journey of the literary and in the true joy of the cultivated spirit (*esprit*). According to Fumaroli,

[this] expression, *Respublica litteraria*, that the learned used between themselves summarizes perfectly the consciousness of their heroes that they belonged to a society within the society, a contemplative society, a society where literature united beyond death and distance in a shared adventure. (Fumaroli, 1998a: 36)

This community of minds is an exclusive one: it unites the most talented and the most willing to engage artfully on a variety of topics through the aesthetic codes of the conversation. The Republic of Letters is a network of intellectual relationships that best expresses the values and ideals of the learned culture of the 17th and 18th centuries. From Fumaroli's perspective, revisiting this era is a task that is both urgent and necessary, for what is at stake here

is not only envisioning Europe from an uncommon ground, not economic, not military, it is also realizing how such a critical and transnational institution is perhaps more desirable now, in the century of Facebook, than it was in the century where books were invented. (Fumaroli, 1998a: 29)

The past is a reservoir of meanings and of practices, and true to his celebration of the spirits of the Ancients in the Quarrel of Ancients and Moderns, Fumaroli's work invites us to consider the excellence in the Republic of Letters as both a metaphor and a heuristic for understanding and emulating the past and the soul of a transnational Europe bonded by the vitality of intellectual life. In other words, Fumaroli's work is an invitation to find the source of a desirable future in the past.

Fumaroli's work in the 1990s coincides with the rise of new political and economic institutions for Europe. For example, the Maastricht Treaty in 1992, the Common Market in 1993, the Schengen Accord in 1995, ensuring freer travel around Europe, and the birth of the common currency – the Euro – in 1999, are all important transformations that came to fruition in the years around the time of Fumaroli's nomination into the French Academy in 1995. In *The Cultural State*, Fumaroli envisions the cultural future of Europe. According to him, Europe – political Europe, the European Union – will not be proclaimed; it will not be declared; it can only be if it is truly desired. The institutional and administrative development of Europe needs to be accompanied by a desire for a Europe whose cultural objects are grounded in the history of its literature, poetry, and humanities. Education is, in Fumaroli's view, the main catalyst in Europe. Of course, initiatives such

as the Erasmus program – developed in the late 1980s in support of greater institutional collaborations – are likely a tool that shapes some forms of exchange. However, to be fully aligned with the desirable path envisioned by Fumaroli, the main thrust that will sustain collective adhesion to Europe and to a European sentiment needs to be born of the humanities. For cultural policy and cultural diplomacy, Fumaroli imagines something different for Europe: a cultural policy that does not follow the French model. Following the French model, he argues:

[is] however the easy path to follow for the political-administrative oligarchy. It is the path of Mozart Year, of the great masses cheering, and that of the dynamization, through bureaucratic fury of the so-called creation, the authoritarian manipulation of the mores, of manners and mentalities. Such drift of the [European] Community based on the French example would mean the end of the liberal political philosophy that inspired it. (Fumaroli, 1992a: 404)

In this excerpt from *The Cultural State*, Fumaroli reveals with exacting clarity how the dominant cultural policy themes and critiques apply to emergent European cultural policy institutions. The strategies crafted by what he envisions as the technocratic elites of France have been reduced to simplistic and commonplace policies and solutions that were being echoed throughout Europe. Once again, Fumaroli draws attention to how French cultural policy has been rendered a degraded cultural experience and a loss of soul: a palliative against a sentiment of defeat. Fumaroli traced the genealogy of contemporary French cultural policy to the aftermath of the War of Algeria. He situates France's cultural policy as an act of mourning the loss of a colonial empire. This neurotic work of claiming audacity in contemporary art as a nation-branding strategy is, in fact, an act of pure arrogance and hypocrisy conceived from misplacing colonial zeal in the cultural sphere. In Fumaroli's views, a Europe that follows this path is turning its back on a liberal tradition that supported the greatest era of France and of many European nations. Fumaroli's call for tradition is not a conservative project, but a project rooted in liberal political philosophy. The path back to this soul – which is a path that can be achieved in France but also more broadly in Europe – necessitates difficult work; it requires that cultural policy engage anew with its liberal roots, and perhaps with the tradition of self-cultivation, where the humanities act as a mediator for this cultural ethos.

At a meta-analytical level, in Fumaroli's work, the humanities are the real diplomats of the mind and the desirable path envisioned for cultural policy and cultural diplomacy in Europe. While the Republic of Letters acts as a lively metaphor to talk about the bond, the desire of Europe, in this case – the humanities are the transcendental figure of culture. For Fumaroli, the vital force of some ideas often lies in myths and mythification, and there is, in Fumaroli's view, a possibility to transform the Republic of Letters into a powerful myth.

Urbs: Paris, New York, and the Americas

Cities are an important topic in the cultural diplomacy literature. In the generous number of contributions written by Marc Fumaroli, cities function as an insightful window into

his cultural deliberations and as an essential dimension in his understanding of international cultural relationships. His writings cover the international ambitions and position of Paris, France, from different angles. More specifically, Fumaroli's work documents the many eras of Paris.

In the 13th century, Paris's glory was tied to the University of Paris. During this era, the St-Genevieve hills that hosted the venerable institution was – for a time – the centre of the global *studium*, attracting those considered the best scholars (Fumaroli, 1992a). The French capital's prestige, however, faded gradually as its university became entangled in the political intrigues of its time, recovering its lustre only in the 17th century – known as France's *Grand Siècle* or Great Century – with the proliferation of the academies, multiple learned societies; and creative, new literary genres that connected the capital to Europe and its university to a broad network of relationships. As a result, the Great Century saw cultural rivalries unfold. For the academician and French painter Nicolas Poussin's trajectory, his own back and forth between Rome and Paris speaks to the place that the French capital was carving for itself in the visual arts (Fumaroli, 1998b). But it is truly in the area of literature that the capital gained its *lettres de noblesse*.

For decades, France, desperate to redress its loss of prestige, has aimed to compete globally in cultural areas and specialties that are far not only from its capacities but also from its soul. Fumaroli notes that central to the French cultural policy is Paris, demarcated by multiple strategies developed in recent years to support Paris's international status. His writings have targeted different events, such as the commemoration of the Bicentennial of the French Revolution in 1989. In the wake of this important and symbolic event, a considerable number of urban renovation projects, many of which had a cultural dimension, were developed in Paris. For Fumaroli, these projects expressed a disdain for the capital's tradition and for its real soul. He went as far as to suggest that under the pretence of being open to the world, these major cultural infrastructure projects disfigured the capital and were more or less an aggression on its urban fabric, all in the name of modernity (Fumaroli, 2019). This position concerning the excess of modern architecture, as a way to situate a city in the global consciousness, is akin to Fumaroli's own views. According to him, the artistic discipline most damaged by France's cultural policy and by the decreasing attention placed on education is most certainly architecture. Furthermore, Fumaroli believed that the codes and language of architecture were forgotten over time. As a result, it is now difficult for Paris to imagine a meaningful contemporary architecture if the obsession is to be a global city. In fact, Fumaroli believed that in following this path, Paris succeeds only in affirming itself as a city of mass leisure and mass tourism.

In *Paris–New York et retour*, Marc Fumaroli (2009) offers a journey into the juxtapositions between the French capital and the American megalopolis. This book is an interesting statement of love and passion for two important cities in the world of art because it offers an important recognition of their impressive cultural contributions. Despite this celebration of art, Fumaroli's book reiterates important critiques against French political elites who are more preoccupied with cultural tourism than they are with the cultural vitality of the capital. Planning for the global stage, for global and mass tourism, would in fact be something counterproductive to Paris's cultural heritage and to its

actual potential. According to Fumaroli, most recent attempts to position Paris through major projects combining culture and modern architecture reflect not only a lack of originality and a weakened intellect, but they also express perhaps a deeper lack of cultural confidence and sense of delusion. These positions echo some of the harshest statements that Fumaroli wrote decades ago, in *The Cultural State*. In a plea for Paris to emancipate itself from the *diktat* of the populist and technocratic cultural elites, Fumaroli urged the city to recover its soul. He wanted Paris to fully embrace its tradition that combines arts and the humanities. Ambitioning to be the city of contemporary art and following a path of urban development strategies that fetishize modern architecture was foolish, and against the city's true nature, according to him.

As an observer, Fumaroli suggested that Paris was retreating in its role as a place that welcomes the diplomacy of mind and culture. The remedy for a flattening view of global modernity is cultural confidence. As an intellectual, he believed that Paris needed to confidently assume its cultural confidence as a city rooted in the traditions of the humanities and that it needed to celebrate its own cultural legacy. Only then, Fumaroli argues, will Paris be in a position to rival the rising cities of culture in America and Asia.

Conclusion

When Marc Fumaroli passed away in June 2020, he was remembered as a genius of both rhetorics and French literary history, but he was systematically credited for his critiques of French cultural policy. In the newspapers *Le Figaro* (Perreault, 2020) and *Le Monde* (Catinchi, 2020), journalists celebrated an immense scholar, as well as someone who did not shy from his opinions about the cultural elites of his – and our – time. One might say with a certain distance that his critiques of the French model of cultural policy may find their echoes today in current reappraisals of this model, with what many see as strengths and others as weaknesses. Current geopolitical tensions have led some, such as Samuel Dufay (2025) in *Le Point*, to see Fumaroli as something of a visionary, particularly with regard to his conviction concerning Europe and its role in global affairs.

In this paper, we approached Marc Fumaroli as an intellectual who engaged with cultural policy. Our intention is to demonstrate that while his work is largely concerned – not with the French model of cultural policy and appraisals of policy orientations from the 1960s through today, but with something that is in fact much broader. In the vast sum of his intellectual work is an important contribution to our understanding of cultural diplomacy. What is compelling is that his contribution is not confined to the publication of a number of essays on cultural policy, nor to the publication of *The Cultural State* in 1991, but it is, in reality, much more pervasive through his work. Beyond the surface of what can be found in his critical essays, there are many theoretical propositions and concepts that can serve to articulate a philosophical perspective on cultural diplomacy.

Moreover, this paper is not simply an attempt to renew our understanding of Marc Fumaroli's contribution to the field of cultural diplomacy but is also an attempt to think anew about how we approach its study. This paper, we argue, is an invitation to consider intellectual history as part of the body of contributions necessary to engage more fully with the debates on cultural diplomacy. Too often, the literature in the field

is confined to policy analysis, to the study of institutions or programmes. While these are common approaches in cultural policy research, we also believe that the field can benefit from greater engagement with intellectual history, understanding it as both an act of analysis and evaluation, but also as constituent parts that have inspired decision-making and approaches to cultural diplomacy.

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