



Sensitive diplomacy

*A relational approach to intersocial and intercultural dynamics, towards
a shared sensible Common*

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Abstract

Within the dominant tradition of international relations and classical realism, diplomacy is primarily conceived as an institutionalized, rational, and strategic practice, oriented toward the defense of national interests and the stabilization of power relations.

Beyond institutional frameworks, and at more regional and local scales, diplomacy unfolds through interpersonal, intersocial, and intercultural dynamics, where subjective and identity-based perceptions shape relationships through implicit codes, symbols, and socio-cultural references, and may generate misunderstandings and visible fractures.

In order to account for more subtle dimensions of socio-cultural interactions, this paper introduces the concept of *sensible diplomacy*, understood as a relational form of diplomacy attentive to the implicit, symbolic, and perceptual dimensions of relationships, particularly socio-cultural ones.

Drawing on philosophical and sociological contributions, it demonstrates that socio-cultural relations are grounded in relational imaginaries, sensible languages, and preconscious and unconscious dynamics.

The sensible thus appears as a primary condition of the diplomatic bond, structuring relational codes and norms, where the uncertainty and relational instability it may generate are considered constitutive elements of the relationship, rather than weaknesses to be eliminated, in the co-construction of the Common.

Rather than a negotiatory logic, sensible diplomacy ultimately favors a posture of translation, understood as the passage between heterogeneous, sensible, and symbolic worlds, in respect for the integrity of individual alterities.

The Common is thus constructed through the sensible translation of languages expressed through a plurality of symbols and implicit codes, articulating shared notions such as recognition and justice, which must be collectively redefined.

Through a process of reciprocal adjustment, hybrid imaginaries common to both parties are co-constructed, rather than through the unilateral imposition of a so-called normative framework, *de facto* imposed by one party or the other, regarding notions of recognition or justice.

Rather than victory, domination, or the imposition of a preconceived order, sensible diplomacy opens the way to forms of cooperation grounded in coexistence and relational balance, in the service of the Common and, ultimately, of particular interests.

Context and challenges

Despite the existence of normative frameworks developed in certain contemporary societies, notably aimed at sanctioning discrimination related to gender, origin, beliefs, or sexual orientation, and although these frameworks remain fundamental, intersocial and intercultural relations continue to be marked by tensions, both latent and overt.

These social and cultural ideals increasingly fail to resonate and generate ever more fragile forms of adherence. This is because socio-cultural fractures may deepen above all within everyday and intimate spheres, which laws, even inclusive ones, struggle to reach: those of symbolic perceptions, implicit and sensible codes, and relational imaginaries.

Through subjective socio-cultural perceptions, without openness to the meaning of postures or to unfamiliar sensible languages, identities become rigid and co-produce unbalanced and conflictual relational imaginaries.

Conversely, sensible understanding and mutual adjustment, through the discovery and experience of other perspectives and ways of thinking, open pathways of reciprocal enrichment.

Sensitive diplomacy is thus proposed as a reframing of relations between socio-cultural alterities, grounded in respect for their integrity and their implicit and subtle dimensions, in order to foster the co-construction of shared meanings and to open the way for processes of reconciliation, through the identification of shared relational grounds.

From formal diplomacy to relational diplomacy

The rationality of realist and traditional diplomacy

Diplomacy is commonly understood as a set of institutional practices based on official representation and the rational negotiation of interests.

This conception, historically structured by formal mechanisms of recognition, finds one of its origins in the Greek term *diplôma*, referring to an official document attesting to a right or a mandate.

This approach finds an emblematic formulation in the work of Hans MORGENTHAU¹, a central figure of classical realism, who conceives diplomacy as resting on a rational calculation of power.

National interest constitutes its guiding principle, and diplomatic rationality is expressed through a lucid assessment of balances, risks, and potential gains. Moral, affective, or relational dimensions are largely secondary, and are sometimes even considered sources of irrationality.

In Kant²'s thought as well, diplomacy is primarily conceived as a technique, more specifically as a form of rational mediation aimed at preventing conflict through law and reason, rather than as a relation in its own right.

In this sense, diplomacy appears less as a space of relationship or moral deliberation than as an instrument for managing power relations within an international system perceived as fundamentally conflictual.

Articulating objective and subjective alterities

In a philosophical sense, diplomacy appears less as a state technique than as a relational practice, aimed at articulating alterities that are both objective and subjective.

These alterities, whether cultural, economic, social, related to gender or generational, are expressed at different scales, from individuals to communities, and up to the state and institutional levels. They manifest through distinct ways of inhabiting the world, perceiving norms, and entering into relations.

The work of the German sociologist and philosopher Georg SIMMEL³ indeed reminds us that any social interaction simultaneously mobilizes two registers of perception. On the one hand, there is an objective perception or reality, constituted by the social, cultural, and economic forms that

¹ MORGENTHAU, Hans J. (1948), *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*, New York, Alfred A. Knopf.

² KANT, Immanuel (1795), *Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Sketch*, Königsberg.

³ SIMMEL, Georg (1908), *Sociology: Inquiries into the Construction of Social Forms*, Leiden, Brill.

structure individuals in their relations and make it possible to situate others through roles, statuses, and shared frames of reference.

On the other hand, there is a subjective perception or reality, linked to the individual self and to affects. This dimension manifests itself through immediate sensible reactions, whether pleasant or unpleasant, triggered by the presence of the other, sometimes independently of the explicit content of the exchange, such as the appreciation of a voice, a tone, or a posture.

From this perspective, socio-cultural relations are not built solely on objective perceptions, but on meaning, beliefs, and our own socio-cultural imaginaries projected onto the sensible perceptions we apprehend in our interlocutor.

The sensible as a primary condition of the relational bond

In *Phenomenology of Perception*, Maurice MERLEAU-PONTY⁴ reminds us that the sensible constitutes the primary mode of our relation to the world: it is prior to any reflective distancing or relational framing. Sensibility does not belong to a secondary register of the experience of the Other, but rather forms the very starting point of relation itself.

In line with EPICTETUS⁵, MERLEAU-PONTY emphasizes that what we perceive is not the Other as such, but the judgments, beliefs, and associations we project onto them. It is through our own perceptual and interpretative biases that the Other, in their socio-cultural alterity and as a stranger, comes to be perceived. Perception is always already charged with meaning, a meaning rooted in the subject's history and in the lived body.

The senses, understood both in their sensory dimension and in their interpretative meaning, two homonymous acceptions in many languages, along with their modes of apprehension, therefore constitute the prisms and filters through which we inevitably enter into relation.

Within this framework, social bonds are not first constructed through formal structures or institutionalized roles, but rather emerge from a pre-existing sensible fabric that is, from the outset, reciprocally biased.

Beyond objective differences, it is within sensible interaction, through a play of mirrors between subjective perceptions, that the confrontation with alterity takes place, revealing our own socio-cultural imaginaries.

⁴ Maurice MERLEAU-PONTY (1945). *Phenomenology of Perception*. Paris: Gallimard.

⁵ Epictetus (1st–2nd century CE). *Enchiridion* (Manual), §5.

The sensible dimensions of the relationship to the “stranger”

The sensible dynamics of the relationship

Often unconsciously, these socio-cultural imaginaries are expressed through non-verbal and sensible languages, such as distance, tone, degrees of emotional intimacy or restraint, rhythm, levels of agitation, and so forth, according to highly diverse codes.

Although the French sociologist Pierre BOURDIEU⁶ highlights socio-cultural tendencies within these “sensible languages” through the notion of habitus, tendencies that can be perceived in ways of speaking, standing, dressing, or in how individuals apprehend what is considered right, beautiful, or acceptable, sensible languages, due to their intimate and multifactorial origins, always remain, to a certain degree, singular to each individual.

Thus, from a sociological perspective, Georg SIMMEL⁷ conceives the relationship as a sensible experience of the other within a shared space: a sensible interaction rooted in the physical co-presence of bodies within a common environment. In this context, the senses function as mediators of co-presence with others, including on intuitive levels.

Within this space, whether physical or mediated, an interactional flow between imaginaries can be co-created through reciprocity, gradually constituting, through trial and error, a shared imaginary, a common frame of reference and symbolism.

Relational imaginaries

From Édouard GLISSANT⁸’s perspective holds that relation is never established between abstract subjects, such as the State or the purely rational individual, but rather between imaginaries shaped by memories, narratives, and representations of the world, which silently orient the ways of entering into Relation.

Diplomacy thus appears as a practice aimed at connecting and adjusting these sensible and symbolic dimensions, in order to regulate confrontations between marked alterities and to identify points of connection within them.

It is from this articulation between imaginary and relation that we will here *define relational imaginaries* as the sets of shared narratives, symbols, memories, representations, and projections through which individuals and socio-cultural collectives experience alterity, conceive

⁶ BOURDIEU, Pierre (1980), *The logic of practice*, Paris, Les Éditions de Minuit.

⁷ SIMMEL, Georg (1908), *Sociology: Studies on the Forms of Socialization*. Leipzig: Duncker & Humblot.

⁸ GLISSANT, Édouard (1990), *Poetics of Relation*. Paris: Gallimard

their relationship to others and to the world, and through which they effectively enter into relation.

Sensible diplomacy and relational fluidity

Because they draw simultaneously on socio-cultural imaginaries and on individual imaginaries, themselves shaped by personal and contextual factors of influence, relational imaginaries are, by nature, in constant evolution, shifting through associations, experiences, and successive reconfigurations of relation.

To apprehend these shifting, shared, and common relational terrains, the Poetics of Relation, developed by Édouard Glissant, proposes a way of thinking the world from experience, sensible forms, and lived relations, rather than from abstract, totalizing, or strictly normative systems.

GLISSANT also reminds us that Relation entails an awareness of uncertainty and the acceptance of a degree of “trembling,” understood as the impossibility of fully stabilizing meaning, positions, or intentions, and as inherently involving confrontation and adjustment.

This approach invites diplomacy to act without total certainty, while remaining attentive to subtle shifts in meaning and to the most delicate relational adjustments, in order to temper and recalibrate confrontations.

It is precisely within this instability that sensible diplomacy unfolds in its most accurate depth: in the acceptance of uncertainty, opacity, and the shifting nature of relation, in other words, in a renunciation of logics of domination, moral persuasion, and the socio-cultural hierarchization of imaginaries.

Toward a sensible Common

A posture of sensible translation

The sensible, both vulnerable and powerful in its capacity to create connections, opens up a novel relational space.

It makes it possible to shift the gaze beyond visible alterities alone, cultural, economic, linguistic, or related to gender, in order to focus on the meaning of differences as they resonate with deeper and widely shared dimensions of human experience, such as social recognition, affects, and emotions.

In this sense, diplomacy appears less as a form of negotiation than as a work of translation, not in order to copy or betray meaning, but to enable its passage between partially incomparable worlds, in line with the thought of Paul RICŒUR⁹.

The diplomat's capacity may lie in their ability to translate subtle relational languages by endowing them with a shared meaning, such as that of mutual recognition, which Paul Ricoeur identifies as a foundation of the common.

This pertains to an art of adjustment that rationality alone cannot fully grasp, and whose absence allows interpretative gaps to accumulate, leading to fragile or artificial commons, due to a lack of sufficiently attuned relational grounding.

The common interest in voluntary concession

Beyond its administrative dimension, diplomacy carries, symbolically, from its very etymology, that of the document folded in two, an idea of dialogue, sharing, equity, and fairness.

Jean-Jacques ROUSSEAU¹⁰ adds a decisive condition: the common interest, understood as the general will, can only emerge from citizens capable of recognizing their own interest within the common.

In this sense, the common is co-constructed by individuals who are aware that the partial renunciation of their individual interest is compensated for, and rebalanced, by the lasting benefits they derive from the common interest, and, moreover, by an ethical satisfaction in voluntarily renouncing particular interest for the benefit of the collective.

Accordingly, the common is built through concession and compromise, understood not as losses, but as a subtle search for the right limit among plural interests.

The just as the sensible foundation of diplomatic stability

Paradoxically, in the name of the common interest, and thus of long-term individual interest, it may be diplomatically beneficial to preserve, to a certain extent, the interest of the adversary, who is called upon to become a collaborator. This reciprocal protection of interests does not contradict one's own interest but, on the contrary, constitutes a condition of its durability.

This shift in perspective, from the immediate defense of interests toward the construction of a durable common, already entails a form of political reflection in the philosophical sense of the term.

In ARISTOTLE¹¹, politics is not primarily a technique of power, but a collective practice of deliberation on the just and the unjust. ARISTOTLE argues that what fundamentally distinguishes

⁹ **RICŒUR, Paul (1990)**, *Oneself as Another*. Paris: Seuil.

¹⁰ **ROUSSEAU, Jean-Jacques (1762)**, *The Social Contract*. Amsterdam.

¹¹ **ARISTOTLE** (4th century BCE). *Politics*, Book I, Chapter 2.

human beings from other animals is not language alone, but the capacity to deliberate together on the just and the unjust, the good and the bad.

The just, thus defined and collectively recognized, becomes integrated into a relational imaginary and establishes an emotional ground sufficiently neutral to guarantee a durable common.

What is at stake here is not a normatively defined just, nor one socially perceived by one party or another, but a just that is felt by both parties, according to sensible and symbolic criteria.

This diplomatic posture is more discreet and, of course, more demanding in terms of responsibility, particularly in media-driven societies where politics is sensationalized and individual or national interest is exalted.

Lessons learned (Conclusion) :

It is this co-construction and shared deliberation, through mediation, translation, and recognition, rather than domination or the erasure of conflict, that makes possible a sensible diplomacy between individuals, and the coexistence of their deep and irreducible alterities.

Sensitive diplomacy is understood here as an intermediate space, fragile and always unfinished, within which the possibility emerges of entering into diplomatic relations without requiring exhaustive understanding, cultural assimilation, or the normalization of reference frameworks.

Relationally, it distinguishes itself from domination, which crushes, from war, which cuts, and from law, which rigidifies. For Hannah ARENDT, the institutional and social political world rests upon the irreducible plurality of human beings.

Diplomacy thus becomes what enables different worlds to share a common space without ever becoming identical. It protects the common world against the violence of uniformization, in the spirit of Édouard GLISSANT's Tout-monde; a relational world, non-totalizable and in constant transformation, where singularities encounter one another without dissolving, offering a relevant framework for thinking sensible diplomacy on a global scale.