The United States prides itself on being the most culturally diverse country in the world. American identity is indeed multiracial, multi-ethnic, and multireligious—a melting pot of historically ever changing people and a constantly evolving self-perception. At face value, the US opposition to the UNESCO Convention on the Diversity of Cultural Expressions is surprising. How could anyone be against culture and diversity, especially in a country where discourses on cultural diversity as a policy ideal have had a strong purchase since the mass immigration of the late nineteenth century and further advanced during the civil rights movement in the 1960s and 1970s?

There are many reasons for this rejection, and to understand them one has first to put culture in the context of the state. In other words, it is necessary to examine the particular ways in which culture and its place in foreign policy are perceived in the United States. Secondly, culture should be placed in the context of UNESCO and understood from the point of view of the United States, by tracing the country’s ambivalent relationship with the world cultural organization. Lastly, the 2005 Convention’s provisions and possible implications should be looked at from the perspective of the US government, which builds on the two contexts mentioned above. This logic would allow for a coherent approach to analyzing the US engagement with UNESCO, past and present, in the field of culture.

The existing academic literature on US participation in UNESCO almost exclusively covers its prewithdrawal period and derives from a vast literature on the Cold War era. In contrast, discussion of the US reengagement with UNESCO and its participation in the organization’s activities since 2003 is virtually nonexistent. This is largely
due to the fact that such information is too recent to be available for archive researchers. The following discussion builds on existing secondary sources for the earlier period and benefits from new research and extensive use of primary sources such as interviews and various documents and official statements, for the more recent stage.

**Culture in the United States and Its Place in the Country’s Foreign Policy**

Unlike in many European countries, where the state produced the nation by promoting the notion of a shared national culture, in the United States political life is not embedded in culture, which, in its UNESCO meaning, is largely left to its own devices as the free expression of a civil society that protects and promotes itself through the free circulation of ideas and information. American identity is a very complex, deeply contested and evolving concept, but a reasonably safe assumption can be made that it was originally shaped not so much by a combination of the many ethnic cultures it encompassed at the moment of the Declaration of Independence as by the country’s political culture. This political culture is centered around the Constitution with its core values of freedom, democracy, law, and individual rights, as well as what Stefan Halper and Jonathan Clarke call “the Big Ideas”—American exceptionalism, “manifest destiny,” detachment, and an “imperialism of righteousness.”

While French exceptionalism was an external projection of its *mission civilisatrice* around the globe, American exceptionalism was instrumental as an internal force, “vital in fashioning a homogeneous, socio-political whole out of so many heterogeneous parts throughout initial and subsequent waves of immigration; and it persists as a platform on which the modern United States interacts with the world.”

As a result of historical developments, Americans are a highly diverse nation: nearly all are descended from immigrants to the country over the past two centuries. Two important groups did not join the American nation voluntarily, the indigenous peoples of the North American continent, who were victims of colonial conquest, and African Americans, brought to the continent as a result of the slave trade. Their disadvantaged position throughout the nation’s history and up to this day has been the source of heated debates on race, ethnicity, and cultural diversity. In the United States cultural diversity is a fact of internal societal composition and the basis of multiculturalist policies. Hence, the use of the term “cultural diversity” in the country has a stable, clearly defined, and socially accepted