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“I Never Meant to Say That”: Rhetoric in Education Abroad

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Abstract

We function in an increasingly politicized environment, hostile to Socratic discourse and the pedagogies of education abroad. The classroom has become a battleground in which ideologies of right and left collide, making debate and dissent problematic. These pressures have distorted the ways in which we talk about our endeavors. We believe that international education is a social good with benefits that transcend individual interest and those of any single country. Yet, if we scratch beneath the surface of the rhetoric of education abroad, we unearth ideas that, inadvertently and unconsciously, mimic neo-conservative elitism and ultra-nationalism. The intent of this essay is to deconstruct those notions and to suggest that an urgent imperative is to revise our agenda, to use language that better reflects the principles that have motivated us to commit to education abroad. The issues analyzed here suggest that, in short, we do not believe what we say, nor do we say what we believe.

Keywords:

Ideologies, nationalism, elitism, rhetoric, education abroad

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“We must realize that democracy... can be fragile”
— Benazir Bhutto (1989, cited in Ardern, 2022)

Socratic Principles: The Classroom as Political Space

Differences of opinion have long been part of the academic ethos. An underlying assumption is that debate and dissent enrich learning. The presentation of arguments and counter arguments have energized the classroom for centuries. Faculty play a role in encouraging this pedagogical methodology by challenging students to think and rethink.

This is a form of Socratic discourse; questions raise answers that generate further questions in processes that lead towards modes of critical thought with intellectual, moral, behavioral, and political implications. There are some necessary pre-conditions for this pedagogy to function: most obviously, a willingness to listen to opinions with which we disagree; to respect difference and, by implication, those who do not share our point-of-view. Such perceptions preclude the arrogance of fundamentalism or single-minded fanaticism. There is a kind of morality in uncertainty, or as the Irish playwright Brian Friel asserted, “confusion is not an ignoble condition” (Friel, 1981, p. 67).

Such discourses are impossible if dominant opinions are invested with the status of incontrovertible truth. Where dissent is blasphemy, political manifestations are inquisition, burning and banning of books, silencing contesting voices, cancelling challenges to orthodoxies. There is no case for complacency in U.S. higher education and by extension education abroad. In many national contexts, higher education functions in an increasingly politicized environment, hostile to Socratic enquiry.

A religious analogy is appropriate. There are those for whom their convictions allow for coexistence with others. In contrast, extreme fundamentalism may define a creed as the sole pathway to God. Dissenters may be material for conversion or, more commonly, seen as damned pariahs, condemned in extremis to be burnt at the stake. For those so condemned, what their tormentors believe is of little significance.

In U.S. higher education contexts, at home and abroad, learning environments are made problematic, not by a single dominant ideology but by a collision of ideologies from right and left. In his review of Roosevelt Montás’

(2021) *Rescuing Socrates*, Len Gutkin (2022) notes that “student activists on the left invoke the language of trauma in curricular debates while the right derides ideological opponents as ‘snowflakes’.”¹

Such an ethos has historical precedence in, for example, the bitter dispute between creationist dogma and evolutionist theory in the years following World War One. In Tennessee, the Butler Act of 1925 made it unlawful “to teach any theory that denies the story of the Divine Creation of man, as taught in the Bible, and to teach instead, that man has descended from a lower order of animals” (Section 1). This law was challenged in the so-called Scopes Monkey Trial in July 1925. High-school teacher, John T. Scopes, agreed to admit to teaching Darwin’s theory of evolution so as to challenge the dominance of the creationist creed. Scopes was initially found guilty and fined, though the verdict was subsequently overturned. The clash between the defense, led by Clarence Darrow, and the prosecution, led by William Jennings Bryan, represented a dramatic collision between irreconcilable versions of truth. Incidentally, the Butler Act was not repealed until 1967 making it technically illegal to teach evolution in the public education classroom for over 40 years. Other states, e.g., Mississippi and Arkansas, enacted similar legislation. Indeed, the controversy has never completely disappeared.

Current controversies around critical race theory (CRT) resonate with that history. One view insists that it should be widely taught while another demands that it must not be taught. The classroom has become a battleground in which politicians and activists contest control over educational content. A new critical race theory tracking project at The University of California in Los Angeles has identified some 500 instances of attempted limits on the teaching of critical race theory. The project’s director, Taifha N. Alexander said that “[i]f you are living in the United States, everywhere from Alaska to New Hampshire and everywhere in between, there have been anti-CRT measures implemented at some level” (cited Goodman, 2022). Educators have little proactive agency in this dispute; balanced academic perspectives are rendered irrelevant.

¹ The Collins English Dictionary defines the term as “a person, especially a young person, viewed as lacking resilience and being excessively prone to taking offence.”

In “An Affront to Open Discourse”, Colleen Flaherty cites Suzanne Nossel, CEO of PEN², on CRT and gender studies:

It’s a very specific perspective that’s being called out and made illegal. This is an affront to open discourse, to the values that we stand for as an organization. For me personally, I find this, as an American, something I never expected to see or witness in my own country. And I think it’s extremely important to point out... this is not just part of the culture war. This is not just a tussle of sorts between the right and the left. This is a real turning of the backs of our governors and legislatures away from fundamental constitutional principles (Flaherty, 2022).

A joint statement issued by the American Association of Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) and PEN America (2022) notes that:

Since January 2021, seventy bills intended to impose restrictions on teaching and learning in colleges and universities have been introduced in twenty-eight states. Such bills have already become law in seven states. The majority of these restrictions are focused on concepts related to race, racism, or gender that legislators regard as divisive or otherwise objectionable.

This is not an environment in which respect for alternative perspectives flourishes. It recalls the battle for the control of knowledge in the Scopes trial and the silencing of dissent in the McCarthyite era. It resonates with a tradition of authoritarian repression. There is alarm in U.S. higher education at what is a blatant political effort to restrain the academic agenda. Simultaneously, at the other end of the political spectrum, there are many occasions in which conservative speakers on campus have been silenced by left-wing students. One of many reports notes that: “Students shouted down speakers at Yale and UC Hastings earlier this month, prompting questions about free speech, academic freedom and the employability of those who disrupted the events” (Moody, 2022). The American Bar Association devotes the July 2022 issue of *Human Rights Magazine* to “articles on the subject of protesters interrupting or

² PEN is an international organization committed to free expression. The organization was founded in New York in 1922 in the interests of Poets, Essayists, Novelists. It was later broadened to Poets, Playwrights, Editors, Essayists, Novelists. Membership and the interests represented are now much broader so that PEN is no longer considered an acronym. The website defines the mission as follows: “PEN America stands at the intersection of literature and human rights to protect free expression in the United States and worldwide... Our mission is to unite writers and their allies to celebrate creative expression and defend the liberties that make it possible” (PEN America, n.d.).

otherwise thwarting speakers with whom they disagree, an issue that has gained national attention primarily on college campuses” (American Bar Association, 2022).

At her commencement address at Harvard University in May 2022, New Zealand Prime Minister, Jacinda Ardern, presented the apocalyptic implications of a situation in which competing ideologies seek to silence opposed views rather than engage with them:

If we don't find once again our ability to argue our corners, yes with the passion and fire that conviction brings, but without the vitriol, hate and violence. If we don't find a way to ensure difference, that space where perspectives, experiences and debate give rise to understanding and compromise, doesn't instead become ... the place of entrenchment, where dialogue departs, solutions shatter, and a crevice between us becomes so deep that no one dares cross to the other side. We are at a precipice... (Ardern, 2022).

The concept of civil society is significant here. On the one hand it describes the actions of associations of interests working for versions of social good. To function effectively, beyond the control of business or government, organizations and institutions need to occupy autonomous spaces. The word civil has another meaning that is vital to creative debate and valuable dissent: polite, courteous, respectful of other individuals. The radical left and conservative right have created formal and informal associations designed to ensure that dissenting views are shut down, that society is rendered uncivil.

Learning environments are subject to simultaneous assault from left and right. Limitations to what can be said or taught have narrowed the areas of permitted discourse. One consequence is that there is safety only in anodyne space. Politicians posture as thought police. Some students, sensitive to offence, act as informers. For educators and students, the classroom is no longer the place in which provocative opinions can be confidently proposed and challenged. A devil's advocate, whereby a teacher offers opinions to encourage student disagreement, is likely to find themselves swiftly misrepresented on social media.

Such an environment is, of course, familiar in recent histories and should be a source of deep unease. The Soviet Union sought to silence Alexandr Solzhenitsyn, Boris Pasternak, Vasily Grossman, Mikhail Bulgakov, and a host of

others who were thought to challenge dominant orthodoxies. Public book burnings in Germany from May 1933 dramatically encapsulated the emergence of Nazi ideologies, redefining Germany to exclude liberal thought and Jewish writing.

Dominant views of what is or is not obscene also led to the banning of books by Henry Miller, D.H. Lawrence, James Joyce, Vladimir Nabokov, Allan Ginsberg, and many others who challenged what were thought of as “community standards”. Satirical voices, most famously that of Lenny Bruce and George Carlin, were prosecuted on the grounds that they subverted essential American values.

Such repressions persist with pressure from both right and left of the political spectrum. PEN America (2022) offers an example of the recent banning of 52 books in August 2022 by one Utah school district. For the most part, the works address LGBTQ+ or African American experiences. Liberals have critiqued the teaching of Mark Twain’s *Huckleberry Finn* on the grounds of the language used (despite Twain’s passionate and consistent anti-racist stance). John Steinbeck’s *Of Mice and Men* is one of many novels subject to the accusation that it propagates racial stereotyping. Alice Walker might also be subject to exclusion on the grounds of anti-Semitism and endorsement of Holocaust denial theories. F. Scott Fitzgerald would not pass approval, nor would Graham Greene, or Evelyn Waugh. The following recipients of the Nobel Prize for Literature would also likely be seen as offensive and offending: Rudyard Kipling, T.S. Eliot, William Faulkner, Ernest Hemingway, William Golding, Eugene O’Neill, and so on ad nauseam.

In fact, the number of authors who had offensive opinions or who represented them in their work is legion. Therein is a significant nuance, however. Representation of offensive views is not the same as promoting them. However, nuanced distinctions do not matter much if you take the view that revising curricula means eliminating works perceived as colonialist, homophobic, racist, sexist, and so on: nor do nuances matter if you seek to repress works that raise disturbing critiques of societal inequalities. The common purpose is to protect students from the challenge of dissent and to insulate them from ideas that disrupt pre-conceived assumptions. As we seek to revise curricula, the choice is between exclusion and revision. Metaphorically, you may burn books or read them more carefully. What we say and do belongs

within a global environment in which voices from right and left seek to silence discord. In contrast, international education, when rooted in Socratic dialogue, affirms the value of open exchange of contested opinions within the limits of law and civility.

Education abroad operates in a politicized world, subject to the clash of open and closed ideologies, internationalism, and nationalism. For the most part, international educators tend to believe in some version of internationalist or cosmopolitan principles, commit to some version of social justice. We tend to take issue with neo-conservative and nationalist doctrines. In this environment, sensitivity towards language, the rhetoric used to describe motivations and rationales, becomes an imperative. Paradoxically, however, by implication rather than intent, we have mimicked neo-conservative and nationalist concepts in ways that obscure a broader, more inclusive version of the objectives of education abroad. We have, in short, learned to speak in languages that do not represent what we really mean to say.

The space within which education abroad resides has narrowed in response to the power of dominant orthodoxies. The idea that encountering unfamiliar ideas in unfamiliar environments acts as a catalyst for creative introspection, radical reexamination of parochialism, has slipped, almost imperceptibly, out of focus. Complex questions that challenge the limits of perception emerge from the interactions of classroom study and encounters with the world beyond. That process, ideally, enacts a form of Socratic learning in which both mind and body, thought and senses, are engaged in dialogue. The best journeys are into space and, from there, into self.

However, at least in public discourse, we describe the benefits of education abroad in terms of U.S. national interests, or in the language of conservative thought, as a form of social Darwinism. The priorities we identify reflect the idioms of free market economics, rather than educational objectives. At the same time, we employ an idea of “culture” that aligns with assumptions made by right-wing nationalists.

The intent of this essay is to deconstruct those notions and, thus, to suggest that an urgent imperative is to revise our agenda, to use language that better reflects the principles that have motivated many of us to commit to education abroad. The task involves emotion, intellect, and commitment to the politics of civil discourse.

US Foreign Policy and Security

The U.S. government's interest in, and support for, education abroad is motivated largely by concerns for national security. This was most explicitly apparent when, in 1991, the National Security Education Program (NSEP) was established: "Our primary mission is to develop a pipeline of foreign language and culture expertise for the U.S. federal government workforce. ... NSEP represents an investment in vital expertise in languages and cultures critical to U.S. national security" (DLNSEO, n.d.).

In 2012, confirming the political agenda, NSEP became part of Defense Language and National Security Education Office. The key function then, and now, is the perceived need to understand better the behaviors and languages of places deemed critical to U.S. interests. The events of September 11, 2001, were certainly somewhere behind these initiatives. "Critical" is defined by real or imagined potential threat from overseas.³ In subsequent iterations, scholarships were directed to learning Arabic, African languages, Persian, Russian, and those spoken by Muslim countries. That these initiatives were under the auspices of the U.S. Department of Defense reveals an explicit intent.

The purpose of education abroad is, in this context, defined solely through American perspectives. Furthermore, it is built around assumptions of hostility from selected nations. The Senator Paul Simon Study Abroad Program Act argues that:

in an age of global trade and business, global interdependence, and global terror... to remain the world's leading economic, military, and political power, the United States needs a workforce—for government, business, and other sectors—educated and experienced in foreign languages and cultures (2008).

Abroad is constructed as space that exists to serve American interests. The macro benefit is that education abroad increases economic competitiveness and enhances security of the country. On a micro level it is about benefits that accrue to individual American students.

³ The fact that most terrorism in the USA is enacted by American individuals is not widely acknowledged. The idea that terrorism is foreign seems embedded in a psychology of fear that has xenophobic implications.

Career Advancement: Constructing an Elite

*I'm in with the 'In' crowd
I go where the 'In' crowd goes
I'm in with the 'In' crowd
And I know what the 'In' crowd knows*
— Billy Page (1964)

This is a typical claim: “international experience will certainly help you to stand out in today’s highly competitive global job market” (Reynolds, 2020). One report claims that U.S. study abroad students earn on average an extra \$7,000 a year more than their counterparts (see IES Abroad, 2012). The research that supports these assertions is flawed, a marketing exercise. It does not, for example, compare the impact of other factors on salary and employability, such as student leadership roles, athletics participation, the field of students’ study, and, most crucially perhaps, where they study. GradReports (2021), for example, reaches the unsurprising conclusion that “colleges with the highest Salary Score for bachelor’s degrees are overwhelmingly private universities, accounting for 86 of the top 100 schools”. Also, that research does not acknowledge the critical impact of class origins and background. Study abroad students are still predominantly drawn from relatively privileged sectors of American society – a factor that has clearly a measurable impact upon earning potential and employability.

Despite frequent references to the United States as a classless society, about 62 percent of Americans (male and female) raised in the top fifth of incomes stay in the top two-fifths... Similarly, 65 percent born in the bottom fifth stay in the bottom two-fifths. (DeParle, 2012)

Research that begins from the assumption that students start at the same place and move upwards through education abroad needs critical reconsideration. Higher education is, demonstrably, a means of advancement, in particular for gifted individuals. However, the potential for broader social reform is undermined by increasing costs, and subsequent unease about loan burdens.

The transformation of student learners into customers reflects another manifestation of the commodification of higher education. The importance of producers and transmitters of wisdom, teachers and researchers, has become secondary compared to managerial priorities, and utilitarian narratives. The

idea of wisdom itself is oddly archaic. Institutional presidents are, for the most part, selected for their talents as fundraisers, politicians, resource managers, rather than for intellectual distinction.

The language of learning further reflects utilitarian transactions in that students as customers have, by implication, purchased a product that will meet pre-determined expectations. Inputs lead to outcomes in what is essentially an industrial model. Faculty are required to define those learning outcomes in syllabi that are analogous to contracts in which, if the buyer fulfills their responsibilities, they will receive that which they have been promised.

That proposition ignores the unpredictability of Socratic enquiry; the end is not known in the beginning. There is, thus, a significant difference between outcomes and objectives. Objectives reflects an intention and aspiration, not a guarantee. In the context of education abroad, the impact of location, situational learning, generates a field of variable impacts. Students will likely learn more or less than is intended. Almost inevitably, the totality of learning will, in any case, be other than that predicted. That does not mean that programs should not indicate the aims and objectives but rather that those are guidelines, signposts towards enrichment. Outcomes of learning, rather than learning outcomes, better reflects personalized experiences, serendipity of encounters, that will take students into spaces that are not pre-determined by inputs. Humanist learning cannot be constrained within industrial metaphors.

However, the manner in which the benefits of education abroad are typically presented focus myopically upon the national interest and individual betterment. There is a major absence in this rhetoric: the foreigners upon which U.S. education abroad depends—universities and organizations that serve U.S. higher education. They are the silent/silenced partners in so far as they have been edited out of the narrative of benefits. Of course, they gain financially. This is a business after all, but it is not only a business. The idea that education abroad offers potential enrichment to both sides of the transaction has all but disappeared. There is no space for Fulbright's (1994) vision of mutuality and empathy for others across national borders. He defined what he called "the greatest power of educational exchange":

... it contributes to the feeling of a common humanity, to an emotional awareness that other countries are populated not by doctrines that we fear but by individual people – people with the same capacity for

pleasure and pain, for cruelty and kindness, as the people we were brought up with in our own countries.

The concept of exchange no longer carries those associations. It is instead, a technical term that describes arrangements between universities defined, frequently, by fee-waiver agreements. The benefit is essentially a matter of financial costs.

Few cling to the utopian idea that education abroad will bring us closer to world peace, but we want to recognize that contacts between individuals with diverse backgrounds might erode damaging stereotypes; create some sense of a common humanity, a consciousness of those factors that unite rather than divide us. The benefits of contact between peoples from other countries and traditions have, however, largely disappeared. Instead, we market education abroad as a mechanism that will enlist students in a global elite, within a globalized free market economy. There may be political sense in this in that support, endorsement, and funding follow demonstrations of measurable attainment, however fragile those measurements may be. The commodification of education abroad seemingly validates the concept of return on investment. It is a superficially seductive notion because it mimics neo-conservative materialism.

The significance of empathy, wisdom, enriched consciousness has been replaced by the idea that students who study abroad will distinguish themselves from the lumpen rest. They will gain a return on their investment.

And who is telling students this? We are.

Culture and Nationalism

That is not the only way in which the rhetoric of education abroad sits uneasily with the core principles of our endeavors. An emphasis on cross-cultural or inter-cultural studies implicitly resonates with assumptions that permeate the ideologies of militant nationalism.

Let me begin with a simple fact. What we do is take students from one country to another country. Countries are artificial, created by some combination of will, accident, war, colonialism, negotiation, invasion. Within Europe, The Peace of Westphalia of 1648 ended over 80 years of conflict and established the idea of the nation-state, defined by political interest, not

necessarily by cohesion of identity, or even by a common language. The most dramatic example of how countries are constructed is in the colonial divisions of Africa, as described by Lord Salisbury in 1890 (cited in McCorquodale and Pangalangan, 2001, p. 867):

We have been engaged in drawing lines upon maps where no white man's foot has ever trod: we have been giving away mountains and rivers and lakes to each other, only hindered by the small impediment that we never knew where the mountains and rivers and lakes were.

A self-evident consequence of these processes is that countries do not correspond to cultures in any meaningful sense unless culture is conceived as everything that happens within a country, a definition so inclusive that it means little or nothing. The following definition is representative of an approach that lacks specificity, drifts into landscapes of imprecision:

Culture refers to values, beliefs, attitudes, preferences, customs, learning styles, communication styles, history/historical interpretations, achievements/ accomplishments, technology, the arts, literature, etc. – the sum total of what a particular group of people has created together, share and transmit.⁴

The borders of countries are artificial, a consequence of historical dynamics. Belgium and the United Kingdom, by way of example, precisely demonstrate a global reality; most countries, however small, are marked by fragmentation and division. National anthems express myths of community intended to create illusions of common purpose. Countries are also temporary. Where is Yugoslavia? What was Yugoslavian culture? The collapse into six republics, and subsequent bloody conflicts, demonstrates the absurdity of the notion that there was a culture that could be called Yugoslavian. We might ask where American culture is located? Would it be in New York or rural Georgia? Similarly, is Italian culture located in Venice or Palermo? These are questions without credible answers. However, there are two contexts in which the assumption is that countries and cultures align. The first is in the rhetoric of militant nationalism. The second is in education abroad.

That is not what we mean to say of course, but it is an implicit consequence of rhetoric, as in this attempt to define adaptability: "... the

⁴ I am not indicating sources here because the statements cited should be seen as typifying a very widespread discourse.

individual's capacity to suspend or modify some of the old cultural ways and learn and accommodate some of the new cultural ways" (Kim, 1992, p. 377). The assumption is that students come with the "old" and encounter the "new". Yet, a crucial question has not been asked: simply, are differences between countries and peoples more significant than similarities? The unexamined assumption is that a student from the U.S. has "cultural ways" which contrast with "new ways" encountered abroad. These distinctions are determined by location, found in the act of crossing borders.

The message to students is that in going abroad they will encounter barriers, "new ways", that they will be helped to cross or negotiate. That is enforced by the notion that being abroad takes students out of their "comfort zone". That statement implies that the American home is exceptional because comfortable, whereas abroad, wherever it is, is uncomfortable, disturbing. Leaving a comfort zone, without any consideration of what students may actually encounter in specific countries, signals that crossing borders is likely to be disturbing and difficult.

Pre-departure materials frequently enforce that message. The University of San Diego and the University of the Pacific offer guides for students that are typical of a widespread approach. There is no intention to criticize these specific documents. The problem is that they represent a norm:

Living and studying abroad and experiencing a culture that may be dramatically different can be a challenging, yet extremely rewarding event for many students. Review the cultural aspects of living abroad before departure so that you are prepared through any adjustment period you may experience. (USD International Center, n.d.)

Students are advised that:

If you ... work carefully through the exercises, you should better understand that the culture you are entering has a distinctly different worldview from mainstream US-American culture... the more you know about what culture is and how it works, the better you will be able to manage and adapt to a new cross-cultural context. (University of the Pacific, n.d.)

Both messages warn students that they are about to meet problematic conditions, "a distinctly different worldview" from something imagined as "mainstream US-American culture": an empty, stereotypical generalization.

What and where is the mainstream culture to which our students belong? Thoughtful consideration of our realities inevitably reveals complex scenarios rather than such simplistic distinctions.

A more credible approach requires specific, nuanced analyses of, for example, the social, political, economic, religious life of the country. The emphasis depends upon learning objectives, but a comparative approach requires consideration of similarities as well as differences, and a credible assessment of the degree to which these are substantial or superficial. In any case, avoiding stereotypical constructs based upon a monocultural view is an intellectual imperative. Statements that begin with propositions such as “the French are,” “English people tend to,” “Americans believe,” “Australians like,” and so on are reductive simplifications of complex realities; precisely an approach to identity that we should seek to disrupt. Those propositions depend upon the delusion that culture and country are in some kind of alignment.

There are, however, people whose ideological assumptions are based around such statements, who posit the singular coherence of national identity. The French National Rally (previously the National Front) endorses Marine Le Pen’s principle of “France for the French”. European right wing nationalist parties have similar convictions: “Our Culture, Our Home, Our Germany” (Alternative for Germany); “Pure Poland, White Poland” (Law and Justice Party); “Keep Sweden Swedish” (Sweden Democrats); “Let’s Take Back Control” (UK Conservative Party Brexit slogan). Similar thought is found elsewhere in notions such as “Make America Great Again”, or the Indian BJP’s commitment to “One Nation, One Culture”.

At the heart of these concepts is the notion that monocultural cohesion within a country’s borders needs to be defended from foreign intrusion. There is a long history of such defensive isolationism, most dramatically in the *shogunate* rule of Japan. *Sakoku*, (“closed country”), was designed to protect the religious, economic, and cultural identity of the country. In the *Edo* period, for over 200 years from the 1630s onwards, foreign trade was heavily controlled and limited mostly to China and the Dutch; Christianity was repressed, and Christians persecuted; strict restrictions on overseas travel and foreign entry into the country were imposed. Foreign ideas and people were perceived as threats to the purity of Japanese identity.

Almost 400 years later, ultra-nationalist Éric Zemmour, a French presidential candidate in 2022, ironically from a Berber Jewish immigrant background, expressed a similar fear of contamination in European and French contexts.

The first problem is ...the invasion of migration. We have a big problem, and we absolutely have to solve it, otherwise France in 20 years will no longer be France, but an area like Lebanon with communities fighting each other (Gray, 2021).

For Zemmour, “people are first of all a product of their culture, their people, their customs” (Gray, 2021). Zemmour imagines a need to protect heterosexual, pure French values against a

... generalised offensive against French and western culture, against the white heterosexual man. These people want above all to make the French and all westerners feel guilty, ashamed of their history, so that they amputate themselves, destroy themselves, abandon their culture, their civilisation, simply so that they no longer feel guilty (Gray, 2021).

Zemmour uses “these people” as a shorthand for those who resist his view of immigration as a “war” against White, heterosexual Christian Europe led by Muslim immigrants and liberal sympathizers. “It is by destroying our cultures, our history, that they ... allow a foreign culture, history and civilisation to come and replace it” (Gray, 2021).

Replacement theory is at the heart of right-wing xenophobia. Following the re-election in Hungary of Fidesz-KDNP in April 2022, Prime Minister Viktor Orbán (2022) described a “suicidal policy in the Western world”:

...the great European population replacement programme, which seeks to replace the missing European Christian children with migrants, with adults arriving from other civilisations. This is also how I see gender madness, which sees the individual as the creator of their identity, including their sexual identity. And this is how I see the programme of liberal Europe, which leaves behind Christianity and the nation states that up until now have held the West together, while putting nothing in their place.

These are ideologies that promote an idea of national and regional identity as heterosexual, Christian, and White. In these narratives, culture is under siege from alien forces that are intentionally creating a “programme”, engaged in a “war” against “civilisation”. The underlying assumption is that

countries and regions are coherent entities, definable in relatively simple terms based upon religion, color, origin, and sexual preferences. The implication is that national borders are, or have become, meaningful ways of distinguishing resident from stranger. A cursory glance at historical realities demonstrates that the border is a theoretical, malleable line commonly reflecting nothing more than political expediency.

Militant parochialism, whether it is described as French, Hungarian, or European, propagates the delusion that going to, or coming from, another country necessarily involves crossing barriers that distinguish what resides within from that which exists beyond: strange, disorienting, sometimes menacing realities. Borders separate the familiar from the unfamiliar. That essentially reactionary message resonates disturbingly with what we tell education abroad students to expect.

We tell them that they are going into a “host culture”. The statement, in singular form, reinforces the illusion of a unified identity, rather than the fragmentation and diversity they are likely to encounter. Further, it offers a misleading metaphor: that students enter other countries in the privileged position of welcome guests. That expectation is simultaneously undermined by a paradoxical and contradictory notion that is part of the common discourse of education abroad. In encountering unfamiliar countries, students are taken out of their “comfort zone”. They are “guests” who may expect to be uncomfortable.

Thus, we echo the nationalist concept that the culture of foreign countries is problematic. We teach students to anticipate a negative response, culture shock, in their new environment. What is this painful condition caused by crossing the border into another country? The University of Miami offers a typical definition (n.d.):

The term culture shock refers to a set of feelings and symptoms that are associated with adjusting to a new culture abroad. These feelings and symptoms include:

- disorientation
- isolation
- frustration
- depression/sadness
- extreme homesickness
- having negative feelings about the host culture
- sleeping or eating disturbances

You may become irritated by small cultural differences or feel that things are done better at home, causing you to react negatively to the host culture.

Furthermore, when students go home, according to the rhetoric of education abroad, they undergo the ordeal of “reentry”, a metaphor drawn from the National Aeronautics and Space Administration. They face, thus, potential dangers of “splash down”, coming back to earth from alien space. In those circumstances, they need to be prepared for “reverse culture shock”. Before they go, students are told to expect problematic spaces that are worryingly different from home. They, therefore, come home having encountered profoundly unsettling cultural distinctions abroad.

In that respect, the rhetoric of nationalism and education abroad is not in fundamental contradiction. Cultures in other countries represent behaviors, customs, and structures that collide with our own, causing discomfort, unease, even distress.

That is not, of course, not what we want to say. The militant nationalism of Zemmour, Orban, or indeed of Narendra Modi, Donald Trump, Boris Johnson, Vladimir Putin, Jair Bolsonaro (and many others) represents the resurgence of xenophobic, defensive isolationism, in many parts of the world. Policies endorsing such depressingly dominant political narratives are in direct collision with the ideals and aspirations embedded in international education: the conviction that encounters with the unfamiliar enrich rather than threaten; that the stranger is not an alien.

We might ask how culture has become such a pervasive notion in education abroad? On the one hand, it offers the safety of anodyne space, a mechanism for avoiding more difficult, contested conversations in areas of politics, diversity, conflict, power, religion, social dynamics, and so on. It is a way of not talking about topics that challenge pre-conceived assumptions, that might require students to listen to opinions with which they disagree.

Bill Allaway, the founder of the University of California’s Education Abroad Program, offered an alternative theory (in conversation with the author many years ago). His view was that modern education abroad emerged after World War Two at a time in which anti-Communist hysteria created an environment inhospitable to internationalism and related ideas. It was safer and simpler to talk about vaguely conceived notions of culture. An historical

expediency led to unexamined orthodoxies which subsequently became embedded in the theory and practice of education abroad. A consequence is that we teach students to peer myopically at other countries through ill-fashioned lenses.

Conclusion: A Return to Ideals?

In her play *Becoming Electra*, Isla van Tricht describes dialogues that took place over 2,000 years ago:

I've been listening to this great podcast...it's about our sacred text, the Mishnah, that dissects the Torah; these two rabbis Hillel and Shammai argue over every single principle: how many candles should we light at Channukah? Who can marry who? What foods can we eat, who is right? And they NEVER resolve it. They end these conflicts with the phrase ... disagreements for the sake of heaven. Disagreements for the sake of heaven. What if faith, what if identity, what if truth isn't about being one thing or another – what if it's about both, neither, all of it. What if truth is in the tension – the tension between two seemingly conflicting spaces, identities, states of being – what if that is where truth is? (Tricht, 2018-2020).

Disagreements for the sake of Heaven is a profound proposition. Argument does not necessarily need to be resolved, there is wisdom in the lack of resolution, in dissent. This notion is radical, challenging, and disturbing. Consensus may not be an unqualified good. According to the lessons of Rabbis Shammai (50 BCE – 30 CE) and Hillel the Elder (c. 110 BC–10 AD), we may sustain disagreement without rancor. Respect for diverse views is not just good manners; it has a moral and intellectual value. Diversity of opinion also matters.

Thus, in our work, we do not inevitably or necessarily agree about everything, nor should we. Debating ideas, the Socratic ideal, should reside at the center of educational processes. I also imagine that the range of ideological beliefs amongst international educators is somewhat narrower than may be found in many other professions. The likelihood is that a broad consensus exists. In contrast, there are right-wing lawyers and socialist lawyers; doctors may or may not believe in democratic principles; the opinions of accountants stretch, I imagine, from the profane to the profound. In education abroad, it would probably be difficult to find many who are xenophobic or who believe in racial eugenics. The tendency instead is hold to egalitarian principles, to believe that strangers are not alien, that engagement with other peoples enriches

consciousness. We believe that teaching and learning in international contexts may have formative impacts that include, and go beyond, individual enrichment. Not least, empathy with those who have backgrounds other than our own creates an ethos in which prejudice will not flourish, in which worth will not be measured by nationalist mythologies or crude commercialism. However, the language we customarily employ contradicts with those fundamental beliefs.

We exist in troublesome times, without consensus or respect for difference. Powerful political forces see the world beyond parochial borders as menacing. Literal or metaphorical walls, not bridges, are constructed to defend against alien intrusion. Like it or not, we are necessarily participants in a conflict between closed and open ideologies: the global divide that has replaced the clash between the “isms” of the Cold War. This imposes a political imperative upon us. International educators have a responsibility to challenge the forces that seek to close our borders and our minds, whether they masquerade in the righteousness of left- or right-wing dogmas.

The work we do, and the ideals to which we commit, goes beyond market economics; it transcends the interest of any single country, recognizes the ineffable significance of the individual beyond ethnicity, race, gender, sexuality, or country of origin. Yet, if we scratch beneath the surface of our rhetoric, we unearth neo-conservative free-market validation of elitism and expose assumptions that resonate with ultra-nationalism. An emphasis on cultural distinction, as a characteristic of encounters in other countries, takes education abroad in two damaging directions: one is towards a lack of specificity, into landscapes of imprecision. The other moves us uneasily towards a rhetoric of militant nationalism. A consequence is that we do not say what we believe, nor do we believe what we say.

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