Overseas Education: Dispelling Official Myths in Latin America

James Petras

Binghamtom University

One of the most important contributions that the study abroad program makes is to allow students and professors to contrast official (government and mass media) versions of reality with their own observations and experiences. In many cases, there is a significant gap between what students were told before they left the U.S. and what they have learned upon their return. Not all students are able or willing to go beyond their preconceived notions, in part because of the limited access to different classes, ethnic and gender groups, or because the nature of the program limits the range of experiences to which students are exposed. Nevertheless, in my nearly forty years of travel to Latin America I have found that most students do develop significantly different and critical views of the "official" versions of Latin America and U.S. foreign policy. The initial reactions to the contrast between preconceptions and reality vary from surprise to indignation, with many pursuing alternative and more critical paradigms. To illustrate this issue, I would like to cite several cases that I have witnessed in the field.

In the mid to late 1960s I traveled to Chile to conduct field research on politics and social structure. Chile attracted many overseas programs and researchers because of the relative openness of the political system and the well-developed academic programs. The official version of Chilean politics was that it was a country with a strong democratic tradition, with a durable democratic regime, very different from the rest of Latin America. Yet, upon arrival, many of us were struck by the enormous social inequalities in Chile, and the way in which the political system was skewed toward defending class privilege. Those of us who pursued our research in the local archives as well as in the field, found that Chilean history was punctuated by military coups in the late 1920s and early 1930s, and had an electoral system that constrained or excluded lower-class

Indian and women voters until well into the twentieth century. While voting was much freer from overt coercion by the mid-century, and a pluralistic party system invigorated public life, some of us questioned the viability of Chilean democracy if the lower classes ever gained an electoral plurality. Being U.S. citizens, many of the privileged classes welcomed us to their affluent homes and landed estates. Their gracious hospitality and pro-U.S. sentiment at first was disarming, if not welcomed. However, when questioned about their feelings regarding a potential electoral victory for a labor-based left coalition, many reacted with distinctly authoritarian responses. One very prominent Senator and landowner, when confronted with the question, answered: "If you think I'm going to give up all this because some ignorant peasants vote for the Marxists, you're crazy." The Senator's response revealed a deep-seated animosity to the idea that electoral politics could work in the interests of the lower-class. For many of us brought up and educated in the official version of Chilean democracy, this, the dark authoritarian side to the political system, was an important learning experience that provided us with a much more nuanced understanding of Chilean politics.

Beginning in the 1980s, many students and researchers visited the Andean countries to study "micro-enterprises," small-scale, mostly owner-operated businesses. Most of the 'official' literature and spokespeople from USAID, the Inter-American Foundation, and a substantial sector of Academia described the "micro-entrepreneurs" as a solution for, not a contributor to, unemployment. Researchers and students met formally and informally with many of the ambulatory street vendors, artisans and household producers. What they found was indeed a few micro-enterprises that were successful: they transformed their homes to brick and built upper floors to their previous shanty-style abodes; some hired a worker or two to meet demand. However, students also discovered that there were high bankruptcy rates, children of micro-entrepreneurs were out on the street or abandoned school, working at an early age. When questioned, most preferred stable wage employment with pensions, vacation and health benefits, all of which were absent from their employment in the "informal economy." Many researchers and students recognized that the official view was biased toward a select few of the successful micro-entrepreneurs; that this road was not freely chosen by the poor, but forced upon them by the lack of opportunities and employment in the formal sector.

Most of the students developed a critical view of their social science textbooks and of the celebration of "penny capitalism." Others, while recognizing the limitations of micro-enterprises, sought to study the successful cases in search of ways to emulate it for the rest.

The contrast between official versions of reality and practiced reality was forcefully brought home to students and professors in overseas programs visiting Brazil. The official version described Brazil as experiencing an "economic miracle in the 1970s" and becoming the seventh most-industrialized country in the world. Yet many students visiting Brazil were shocked by miles and miles of *favelas*, shanty-towns that surrounded the major industrial cities of the southeast. Those who traveled out of the city to the rural hinterland were shocked to find huge uncultivated private estates and millions of landless rural workers. In a seminar, one of the leading defenders of official "free market" policy raised more than a few eyebrows from several passionate interlocutors from his foreign student audience when he said, without irony, "The economy is doing fine, only the people are doing badly." One overseas student raised his hand and asked, with a strong dose of sarcasm: "Aren't the people part of the economy?" While the official economist passed on the standard free market formula—"a little pain is necessary for future prosperity"—more than a few students began to question the virtue and rigor of neo-liberal economic doctrine. In this regard, when I questioned the students about their previous thinking about economic orthodoxy and their prior exposure to it in the classroom, many stated that they were taught about it back in the Economics 101 classes. Moreover, many said it seemed to fit in with their own middle-class suburban life style. In Brazil, however, they saw the application of orthodox, neo-liberal doctrines as favoring the rich over the poor. Some even questioned its scientific utility since its free market assumptions didn't correspond to the vast socio-economic disparities that they observed.

Overseas studies program participants, particularly minorities, had been led to expect a racial democracy. Nourished on the richness of Afro-Brazilian music and dance, and the presence of superstar soccer players, many were shocked by the profound racial inequalities in employment, housing and land ownership. While racial inequality was something most U.S. students were informed about from their own home country studies and experiences, they were surprised at the extent to which most

European Brazilians denied its existence, some going so far as to state that the students were "projecting their problems onto Brazil." Students made informal cross-national comparisons that were useful in understanding their own society, and the ways in which people of influence rationalized and/or obfuscated injustices in the U.S.

The more perceptive students noted the ubiquitous role of the U.S. in the economy, cultural life and lifestyle of the Latin societies they visited. Most commonly, they commented on the dominant position of Euro-American banks and multinationals and the presence of U.S. real estate corporations (Twentieth Century), fast food restaurants (McDonalds, Pizza Hut, etc.), as well as pop singers, Internet, etc. While the images of familiar banking and food outlets was reassuring to many, others were disappointed that many of the indigenous enterprises and gastronomic delights were being forced out or adapting to the U.S. way of life. Frequently, students discussed whether the economic and cultural expansion and takeover of local markets was a new form of imperialism or whether it was the "modernization" of "traditional societies."

While most students made an effort to understand Latin societies on their own terms, and tried to avoid ethnocentric and disparaging comparative comments on their host countries, subtle comparison frequently crept in, particularly when hitches developed in everyday life: transport strikes, bureaucratic delays, bribe-taking police, etc. However, some of the students were also impressed by the social solidarity of low-income groups (plantation workers, dockers, and miners) who sacrificed monetary gain to resist unjust firings. This solidarity contrasted with the individualistic-competitive ethos many students had been taught as the formula for success. In some instances students were occasionally drawn into public demonstrations; for example, some students joined a march in defense of higher salaries for rural school teachers in La Paz, Bolivia in the early 1990s. While most student comparisons highlighted the obvious higher living standards in the U.S., in some cases—mostly prior to the advent of "free-market" capitalist policies slashing the social budget—students were impressed by the welfare state in Argentina and Uruguay. Students were genuinely surprised to discover (in the 1960s and early 1970s) universal health coverage, one-month paid vacations, paid maternity leave, and tuition-free higher education. These advanced social programs sometimes raised critical questions about why the U.S., with a much higher

GNP, could not also provide these programs for its population. Thus, the exposure to organized and socially conscious labor and peasant movements and activist student assemblies raised important questions about the constraints and limitations of our own version of democracy.

Probably the most dramatic change in student attitudes concerning U.S. involvement in Latin America took place in Chile during the early 1970s. The democratic election of a Socialist President, Salvador Allende, stimulated a great deal of intellectual curiosity in the U.S. academic world. Many students signed up to study at the University of Chile, the Catholic University in Santiago or the University of Concepcion. While in Chile they observed the positive outcomes of the re-distributive reforms (land, income, social allocations) on people's living standards. What struck and angered many students was the distorted reporting by the U.S. media, especially the respected *New York Times* and *Washington Post* as well as the nightly news reports on the major networks. Frequently, parents of students called to warn them of a Soviet takeover, and of "creeping totalitarianism," while the students were experiencing probably the greatest spread of political viewpoints in the local media. Many students were shocked by the willful distortions in the U.S. media and the hostile interventionist attitude of the U.S. Embassy in Santiago. Some of the overseas graduate students suspected covert CIA operations, in funding local business group lock-outs and violent strikes by truck owners, most of which was subsequently confirmed by U.S. Congressional hearings. While U. S. students, like their Chilean counterparts, took sides for and against the nationalization of U.S. mining and banking corporations, almost all were opposed to the U.S. government's effort to destabilize Chilean democracy. Students found it difficult to believe that the U.S. government, which they had been taught always stood for democracy and fair play, would systematically act to overthrow a democracy, to defend U.S. corporate interests.

I remember one seminar in which an American student stood up and challenged the idea that the U.S. was engaged in covert operations. The following week, Jack Anderson, the syndicated columnist published confidential reports of CIA and International Telephone and Telegraph covert operations designed to overthrow the Socialist government. The shock of recognition, of living in a country where the U.S. was engaged in undemocratic politics, raised troubling questions for many of the overseas students.

Overseas study groups also visited Cuba, some attracted by the "forbidden fruit" syndrome, others—encouraged by their professors to look at alternatives to capitalism—because of intellectual curiosity. The students, through organized seminars and classes, were able to question their host institutions about the one-party state and the restrictions on the press, were exposed to the high-quality national health system, the hemisphere's lowest infant mortality rate, and universal literacy.

Most students returned to the U.S. with a much more nuanced and informed view of Cuba, one that differed substantially from the official Washington "demonological" labeling of the island. The positive side of student visits to Cuba was the near-universal opposition to the U.S. travel and educational exchange restrictions as well as the economic embargo. On the other side, few students were converted to Communism as a political ideology. The everyday experience of students discussing informally with their Cuban counterparts frequently led to discussions of different models of democracy, as well as common likes—i.e., Cuban salsa, U.S. rock-and-roll, baseball, etc. What U.S. students discovered is that Cubans were not afraid to spell out their wants and dislikes about society and regime policy even as they express strong support for their country's defense of its national sovereignty. The Cubans, in the eyes of the students, were not ideological robots nor were they all eager to jump on the next raft to Miami, even if many had relatives overseas. While some U.S. students were critical of "consumerism" in their own society, they were surprised by the high degree of consumer interests in Cuba, particularly with the economic scarcities of the 1990s. So while they discovered Cuban opposition to Washington's policies to Cuba, they also noted the desire of many young Cubans to partake of "mall culture."

When overseas students are not in direct contact with a diverse population and alternative viewpoints, they may receive a distorted vision of the society they are studying. I spoke with a number of students who studied at the conservative Catholic University during the Pinochet dictatorship. Many of the democratically-inclined professors and students had been previously purged from the university. The students and professors were technically competent, very pro-U.S. and enthusiastic partisans of the law and order rule of the Pinochet dictatorship. While almost all of the U.S. students considered themselves in favor of democracy, many of them, in part or whole, accepted the view that democracy had led to chaos,

and a Russian takeover and/or the destruction of Chile necessitated a military takeover. Most of these students were wined and dined in the affluent households of their Chilean counterparts. Some were invited to the beachfront second homes and country clubs as guests of the family. There were few or no field trips to the massive shanty-towns, only photos in the controlled press of smiling slum-dwellers receiving housing titles from the benign, grandfatherly dictator Augusto Pinochet. The repeated theme of visible and experiential middle-class prosperity against the previous chaotic democratic nightmare, as transmitted by the student partisans of the dictatorship, had the effect of relativizing the idea of democracy. Many students developed the idea that democracy is good for advanced countries like us, and not appropriate for countries not ready for it. The micro-experience in this case, extrapolated from any historical data, led U.S. students to a distorted perspective on the past: they accepted the class bias of their affluent middle-class hosts, which may have also resonated with the suburban fears of their own affluent family backgrounds.

In this case, overseas education failed to open students to diverse social situations. Intellectually speaking, it might have given a well-informed and historically-minded researcher an insight into how class privilege shapes social perceptions.

Two important points arise from these experiences: the importance of the broadest possible exposure to different social classes, ethnic and gender groups as well as political debates; and a critical rereading of previous historical interpretations, avoiding exclusively "kings and queens" views of history, and incorporating history from below—the voices and testimonials of groups who are not normally discussed by orthodox economists and conventional historians who focus on great men and political scientists, and who view politics from a Washington perspective.

Conclusion

Study abroad programs and other genuine cultural exchange programs have in many instances played an important role in the education of U.S. students and their academic mentors. Notwithstanding the occasional use of these cultural exchanges by U.S. intelligence agencies for information-gathering purposes, the programs have provided an opportunity for many students to develop a more nuanced and critical under-

standing of our relations with other societies and possible alternative ways of living and producing.

On the basis of the "case studies" cited above there are several pedagogical approaches which could enhance the overseas experience:

- A more nuanced approach to conceptual analysis. The simple dichotomy of military dictatorships versus civilian democracies overlooks the degree to which latent and overt authoritarian institutions and behaviors exist within electoral systems. It is important to point out the distinction between formal democracies and substantive democracies to aid students in understanding the co-habitation of electoral regimes with abysmal class inequalities.

- With regard to the economy, the use of the term "market economies" or "free market economies" obscures the vast differences in commodity exchanges in local markets between petty producers and the operation of multi-national corporations operating in the international market. Along similar lines, the free market usually refers to the easy access of local markets by large scale foreign owned enterprises at the expense of small scale local producers, who not infrequently are unable to compete and are bankrupt.

Apart from conceptual refinements, overseas students would benefit from a more nuanced understanding of the plurality of views and interests and perspectives both in the U.S. and Latin America (or other overseas host regions). The pedagogical technique of describing the U.S. versus Latin American (or Arab) perspectives is deeply flawed. It overlooks the profound internal differences in class, race, and gender within each country, particularly the elite versus non-elite views. This is particularly a problem when teachers refer to "our" interests, when in fact they refer to the interests of specific policy elites and their business partners. There are within the U.S. a variety of groups with divergent conceptions of "our" interests, particularly once one departs form the Washington Beltway. More important, there are people-to-people programs, diplomatic and cultural exchanges that cut across state policies, and interests that enhance international understanding and cooperation.

Overseas studies programs have succeeded in furthering cultural understanding and diminished ethnocentrism. The best programs have

also enabled students and faculty, through their direct experiences, to cut through the propaganda fog that emanates from a mass media and government which paints overly rosy pictures of allies and blackens the image of real or imagined adversaries.