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LIBERAL LEARNING AND STUDY ABROAD: Meditations from Central Europe

Michael D. Monahan

I. Introduction

To a participant whose primary professional activity focuses on international education, the Macalester College faculty development seminar in Central Europe, in addition to providing an opportunity to learn about transition and globalization in a critical area of the world, preparing participants to infuse a Central European dimension into their academic work, and forming a more tightly-knit community of scholars, offered undisturbed moments to reflect upon the relationship between liberal learning and study abroad.

Thanks largely to the design and tone of the program, the inevitable stimulation created by the interpenetration of formal seminar sessions and informal field learning, and the contributions of the participants, even such a short sojourn can provide a crucial break to step away from daily administrative and programming concerns to listen, think, reflect, empathize, wonder, imagine, and create intellectual and cross-cultural connections that help make education whole again.

In fact, this kind of seminar is precisely (albeit in a compressed fashion) what study abroad is all about: an opportunity to look with fresh eyes, and through the eyes of others, upon the world; a delicious and all too rare moment of being fully engaged while also in retreat from usual ways of working; a time to live and learn deliberately, with purpose and focus, in a different culture; a time to rehydrate the mind.

The purpose of this paper is to present some brief meditations and musings on the relationship between liberal learning and study abroad, drawing on the Macalester seminar in Central Europe to illustrate the ecology of this relationship. By doing so, I also hope to encourage further discussion, particularly within the international education community, of the possible implications, for both liberal learning and study abroad, of soldering immediate experience to intellectual abstraction.

II. Liberal Learning and Study Abroad

For some time now the international education community has focused on ways of expanding and diversifying study abroad. Efforts are well under way toward increasing student mobility in higher education, expanding learning opportunities in a wider variety of countries and cultures, increasing participation by underrepresented students, giving more exposure to less commonly taught languages, and increasing study of diverse academic disciplines in uncommon geographical destinations.

These efforts all seem to be worthwhile, as long as the deeper purposes of study abroad are also well understood and articulated. This is important, perhaps especially as study abroad becomes more acceptable in the academy, recruiting becomes more competitive, and the enrollment imperative gets more attention at many institutions. But increased “mobility” must not become a goal in and of itself, especially not at the expense of high-quality academic programming and immersive cross-cultural learning. Given current trends and concerns, it is perhaps helpful that international educators regularly take a sober look at liberal learning and its relationship to study abroad.

For our students as well as for ourselves as educators, liberal learning and study abroad mean — and I, for one, believe they should continue to mean — a certain *emancipation* from regular circumstances (personal, cultural, intellectual, geographical, and metaphysical) and a special *interval* of freedom in which to finely adjust the mix of reason and imagination in our lives. Study abroad can certainly be an adventure that involves educational travel as a means of self-discovery, but it needs to be much more than this. Like liberal learning, it should help us develop a genuine appreciation for the human condition as a

predicament, not simply as a journey, while also instilling in each student an authentic feeling of being at home in a complex world.¹ Some might say, tongue-in-cheek, that liberal education teaches students to despise the money that it prevents them from earning. But this, too, is not quite correct. More seriously, as W. E. B. Du Bois put it,

The function of [liberal learning] is not simply to teach breadwinning . . . it is, above all, to be the organ of that fine adjustment between real life and the growing knowledge of life, an adjustment which forms the secret of civilization.²

Furthermore, study abroad supports liberal education by helping sojourners become responsible for their *own* learning, become acutely aware of their ignorance, squarely face the profound and difficult challenge of integrating knowledge and life, and avoid the ruts of overspecialization. Study abroad programs need to be designed to encourage *integrative thinking*—the same kind of thinking that requires intellectual abstraction and immediate practical experience and is so central to liberal learning. Study abroad must also require and help students come to terms with life's ambiguities, complexities, and compromises in a way that study in their home culture rarely (or at least less readily) can. This kind of study leads students to an enlarged understanding of their own culture and place in the world by learning about the host community. It helps students see the past, present, and future not merely as a succession of events, actions, and reactions, but from the perspective of other traditions and often through the eyes of those who have lived local history. This is perhaps particularly important for U.S. students who, at their own intellectual risk, tend to be too loosely engaged with history.

III. The Macalester Seminar and Study Abroad

Drawing on the Macalester seminar and the out-of-class discussions and field visits that it encouraged and facilitated, it seems that a good case could be made for Central Europe as an ideal site for study abroad. Among the most engaging discussions and enduring questions raised by the seminar are those linked

to the theme of *transition and globalization*. As these concepts and processes are unpacked, key topics emerge that should be included in interdisciplinary programs for U.S. undergraduates studying abroad in the region.

As is often pointed out by academics and lay people alike, in order to understand contemporary Central Europe the legacy of communism needs to be understood. This includes the impact of years of unwillingness to admit to serious problems (be they environmental, political, economic, or cultural) simply because these problems were not, theoretically, supposed to be possible in centrally planned socialist societies. Post-1989 responses in a number of areas to the years of communist rule also need to be studied. This includes, for example, the development of the distinctly "green shade" of the revolution as a reaction against a deteriorating environment and the attraction of ecological dissent to political dissidents. This, in turn, might lead to an examination of the structural changes in environmental protection in the region, the process of changing social attitudes toward the environment, the influence of Central Europeans' aspirations to join the European Union (a community that increasingly stresses the importance of a clean environment), and the impact of the economic slowdown and restructuring away from heavy industry. For the environment, the next challenge will be to move beyond "end-of-pipe" cleanup and focus on preventative measures and sustainable eco-efficient development.

On the political and economic fronts, broad agreement has emerged in Central Europe (as elsewhere) that central planning, which assumed that a single group of people knows better and can make better decisions than individuals, is a failure. Central Europe has illustrated that this kind economic and political system does not, and never has, worked. This, again, is a key topic for study in the region and the challenge now is to understand the implications of unloading the governments of Central Europe and passing responsibility on to individual private citizens. This is especially difficult at a time when these citizens recognize the "dead-endedness" of the communist trajectory of history, yet still hope to retrieve values that can make the transition less disturbing. The centralist system (often characterized by an attitude of "they pretend to pay me, I pretend to work") may well be decomposed, disintegrated, and exhausted, but to

move wholesale to a free-market democratic system without first establishing a legal and cultural infrastructure is proving to be extremely difficult.

Beyond this, the seminar and related discussions stimulate this question: What happens when “the dream” comes true? That is, to present it lightly, what happens if Central Europeans succeed in turning communism into consumerism and Marx and Engels into Marks and Spencer? More seriously, we must ask whether Central Europe needs to prolong this historical moment of transition so that choices can be made before the region’s desperate gallop toward the West is completed. These, among others, it seems, are the critically important issues for the future of Central Europe and have the power to animate productive cross-disciplinary discussion. To raise these kinds of questions is the key function of the seminar and has important implications for liberal learning and study abroad program design.

IV. Study Abroad in Central Europe: Program Design, Content, and Pedagogical Approach

In seriously considering Central Europe as a potential site for study abroad, hard questions must be asked both about its general appropriateness for liberal learning and about specific program designs. What is the structure of a good program in this region of the world? How might U.S. students be best prepared to take advantage of the site? Given the historical crossroads at which Central Europe currently finds itself, should the broad theme of “transition and globalization” drive the curriculum of study abroad? How are questions of local culture and history to be approached during this period of post-1989 near-euphoric focus on a Western model of social development, democratization, and free-market economy? What are the potential pitfalls of trying to view Central Europe through the lenses of the West? How does the creative imagination of the people most directly involved in building civil society come to influence the situation? What is the role of human agency in the great historical changes rocking the region? In considering Central Europe, is there any validity to the arguments about the “end of history”³ or the “clash of civilizations”?⁴

U.S. students abroad are often idealistic enough to search for and expect *solutions* that are collaboratively forged by the protagonists. Nevertheless, at the end of the day, we must ask if there are truly legitimate solutions to the many problems and paradoxes faced by the region, or whether there are, rather, only *outcomes* to which we must accommodate ourselves. This solution/outcome distinction is an uncomfortable one for many U.S. students, but by focusing on it, study abroad programs can teach students other ways of viewing the world.

As a starting point and as an example, we might sketch, in broadstroke, a framework for a study abroad program designed for U.S. undergraduate liberal arts students in Central Europe. In my estimation, an effective program might include a very carefully crafted interdisciplinary curriculum that links pre-departure orientation, rigorous on-site academic study side by side with host country nationals in the classroom, astutely selected readings, language study, a meaningful level of cultural immersion through field learning and shared living, and room for spontaneous encounters. *Interdisciplinarity* would be a key feature, for if ever there was a good illustration of a region whose problems and achievements do not organize themselves along the lines of academic departments and disciplines, Central Europe is the case.

A basic premise in considering study abroad in Central Europe must be that no problem can be understood, let alone resolved, without a deep exploration of its fundamental causes (or those necessary and sufficient conditions that are likely to give rise to it). This, then, is the guiding principle behind curriculum design for study abroad and must be integral to any program that aims to help students see the complexity of the issues before drawing their own conclusions. Program design must consider assumptions about learning and the relationship between the methods by which knowledge is acquired and the way it is conveyed. This, too, is an approach consistent with liberal learning.

Among the topics that are particularly important in understanding contemporary Central Europe are history as a vital element in national self-awareness; the legacy of communism; the perceived utility of communal affiliation; the role of civil society; questions of demography, territory, and self-determination;

views on violence and its relationship to revolutionary ideas; environmental sustainability; and notions of cultural cohesion, identity, myth, and shared memory. The challenge is to choose topics carefully, recognizing that in good programs not all areas of life and culture need to receive attention, and then to integrate these topics into a cohesive program that will help students gain a more profound understanding of the nature and possible futures of Central Europe. Study abroad program design must facilitate the movement of students from *awareness* to appropriate *behavior* to *understanding* to an *ability to explain and articulate* their learning — all this while sacrificing neither intellectual rigor nor the lyricism of experience.

Beyond this, study abroad program design should help students interpret the subtleties of life in Central Europe, including the perception that some visitors have of the region's tragic pursuit of being; uncertainty about the present; and an exquisite, residual melancholy that, while hard to shake off, seems, paradoxically, to be embedded in hope. This is an example, it seems to me, of how Central Europe challenges the visitor through its complexity and becomes a region in which "*la vérité est dans les nuances.*"

The pedagogical approach would need to reflect the principles of student-centered liberal education. The goal of such programming is to bring students face to face with very perplexing and even disturbing local realities and require both teachers and students to think critically and creatively about such notions as culture, identity, political aspiration, and the way human beings view the world, interact with each other, and govern themselves.

It is precisely this kind of programming that incorporates the central tenants of liberal learning and has important contributions to make to the effort to improve higher education through study abroad. Specifically, Central Europe as a region of *multicultural societies in transition* is an ideal place, especially at this historical moment, for the international sojourner to experience and meditate upon complex questions of *change and continuity*. To meditate on such questions has very important implications for the approaches international educators take to understanding the paradoxical processes of globalization in the late twentieth century: this seemingly simultaneous movement toward

cultural integration and homogenization on the one hand, and *disintegration and diversity* on the other. There may well be a certain centripetal logic to the interdependence we hear so much about in today's world, but, even in our quotidian lives, there is also a certain alienation, unconnectedness, and fragmentation. A sojourn in Central Europe can demonstrate this to students, shedding light on these and other transnational phenomena.

On a global scale, the tension between the forces of integration on the one hand, and those of fragmentation on the other, cannot be easily sustained for long. Yet this tension, it seems, is a hallmark of our times and is a particularly critical aspect of life in multicultural societies in transition. Such tensions must, in one way or another, find solutions. The alternative is to simply resign ourselves to live with outcomes.

Other worldwide phenomena can also be better understood by deepening our understanding of Central Europe. For example, as study abroad participants (including both faculty and students) have for some time noted—and this is largely due to the advance of communications technology, increased travel, global trade, and other forces that help integrate the world and develop our collective consciousness—*space and time* are indeed shrinking. Even the very notion of *distance* itself, for so long such a critical and influential element in the study abroad experience, is, during these times, being reconstituted. Study abroad participants now stay in touch with each other and with their families, sometimes on a daily basis, via electronic mail. We have not yet begun to understand the general implications of this shrinking of distance, let alone its specific impact on how we experience and learn from a “distant” place. As a region that for more than a generation has been, at least in some ways, cut off from the wider world and particularly from the West, the communications revolution promises to have a profound impact on Central Europe. Through study abroad, our students can be exposed to this important aspect of globalization and transition.

V. Questions of Identity and Destiny

Two other important and interrelated contemporary questions, those of identity and destiny, especially *collective national identity*, and the *interdependence of human destiny*, can also be produc-

tively studied in Central Europe and could serve well as synthesizing topics in the curriculum of study abroad in the region. When considering globalization and transition, as well as the prospects for peace and development, it seems that, sooner or later, the analytical disputes gather in the vicinity of these questions. For example, what you learn about minority cultures and their views on identity and destiny in societies in transition, as what you find out about any area of research, depends heavily on the kinds of questions you ask. To better understand Central Europe, I am convinced, we must ask questions about the nature of collective national identity and its relation to aspirations and the development of self. As Cheik Hamidou Kane said,

Every hour that passes brings a supplemental ignition to the crucible in which the world is being fused. We have not had the same past, you and ourselves, but we shall have, strictly, the same future. The era of separate destinies has run its course.⁵

In Central Europe, not to mention the Balkans and many other parts of the globe, national identity is a complex, multidimensional concept that goes much deeper than surface politics and touches delicate sentiments of *collective destiny* and the meaning of cultural revival after many years of communism. In some cases, it is also a question of cultural *survival*. National identity often includes questions of territory, shared memory, historical consciousness, images, values, customs, religion, language, and self-governance. National identity drives the move toward autonomy, self-determination, and sovereignty.

This identity manifests itself in the region in many ways, including political symbols, statues, ceremonies to remember the national dead, flags, names, beliefs, and the languages used and not used. It is perhaps a topic of particular importance to Central and Eastern Europe, where there are estimated to be some 30 to 40 million members of minorities, including Hungarians in Romania (Transylvania), Slovakia, the Czech Republic and elsewhere, and *Roma* (Gypsies) throughout the region.

Why does national identity persist? This is a critical question for the postindustrial world and it no doubt has many answers. Perhaps the deepest and most complex reason, as Anthony Smith suggests, is that national identity can “provide a satisfy-

ing answer to the problem of personal oblivion" and "identification with the 'nation' in a secular era is the surest way to surmount the finality of death and ensure a measure of personal immortality."⁶ Intercultural relations and the identities that influence them are more complex, multilayered, and fluid than they first appear. The notion of a postmodern, global, memoryless culture, inherently eclectic and in motion, already influences many societies in today's world, and this will no doubt create a fascinating drama in Central Europe.

In this region, as in other areas of the world where different cultures live side by side and are undergoing sociopolitical transitions, it is critical not only to learn about the intransigence of cultural divisions but also about the understandings and accommodations that add texture to the relations between different groups. The rationale for describing and categorizing a society as "multicultural" and "in transition" must also be carefully explained, for this has multiple implications both for the study of intercommunal relations and for the kind of intellectual and cross-cultural challenges societies like those of contemporary Central Europe present to study abroad participants. An overview of key elements of social and political life in these societies needs to be presented to set the context for a more focused discussion of the region.

Clearly not all societies of Central Europe are alike, and they are unlikely to be similarly experienced by all study abroad participants. Nevertheless, at both the conceptual and practical levels, there are parallel issues that can be fruitfully explored in societies that are experiencing ideologic tensions, cultural conflicts, and political and economic transformation. It is in this comparative context, with a backdrop of the complex processes of globalization, that Central Europe as a study abroad site can be favorably assessed.

Such an assessment should be deliberately and rigorously comparative and interdisciplinary, identifying common characteristics of the diverse societies and examining how problems are solved across cultures. Common concerns include, for example, questions about minorities; the driving forces behind the quest for national and ethnic identity; the territorial imperative; and the difficulty sojourners have in trying to understand ten-

sions across cultures in a context different from their home country.

The main point I want to make here is that it is precisely the existence of divisions, perceived and real — dual traditions in close geographical proximity, a divergence of worldviews and perceptions, contradictory aspirations, the politicization of identities — that makes study abroad sojourns in Central Europe both complex and potentially so rewarding.

By describing Central Europe as a multicultural region in transition and reflecting on the experience of sojourners there, it is easy to become convinced that the region is in many ways an ideal place for study abroad. The countries of Central Europe can provide the well-prepared and dedicated student a rich environment to learn about a deeply complex historical and contemporary relationship between peoples of different traditions and of similar peoples undergoing difficult transitions. In so doing, it challenges students to learn the lessons of history and convert these into a conceptual framework that encompasses complexity. It demands personal engagement, careful evaluation of assumptions and stereotypes, and creative thinking. This, again, is where study abroad in Central Europe and liberal learning may become a single enterprise.

VI. Concluding Remarks

Maybe the expression “All real living is meeting” is particularly true today in Central Europe. To understand life and culture abroad, we must indeed strive for the intimate encounter with the “other.”

And if, as I believe it to be the case, the essence of human beings is to choose how to live, and if history is a drama with many acts influenced by both ideas and reality, then studying in multicultural societies in transition — with all that this means in terms of identity, destiny, aspirations, the quest for harmony, and the struggle with globalization — can be an insightful experience, a coming together, or, as Camus said in a different context, one of those “delicious moments when imagination and intelligence are fused.”⁷ In other words, study abroad *becomes* liberal learning.

Notes

1. I am indebted to the fictional writing of Albert Camus, which so often evokes a sense of the human condition as “predicament,” to John Dewey’s philosophical reflections on education (see especially *Experience and Education* [Macmillan: New York, 1938]; to *The Voice of Liberal Learning: Michael Oakeshott on Education*, Timothy Fuller, ed., (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), which generally emphasizes the cultivation of the mind in higher education and the “gift of the interval” (217); and, especially, to the Macalester faculty members and guests who, during the Budapest seminar, so generously demonstrated that intellectual resources are rejuvenated by sharing them.
2. W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*. (New York: Penguin, 1982): 117. I thank Dr. Ahmed I. Samatar for bringing this to my attention.
3. See Francis Fukuyama’s book *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Avon Books, 1992), which includes discussion of whether “it makes sense for us once again to speak of a coherent and directional History of mankind that will eventually lead the greater part of humanity to liberal democracy” (xii).
4. See Samuel P. Huntington’s article “The Clash of Civilizations” in *Foreign Affairs* 72, No. 3 (Summer 1993), in which he argues that future world conflicts will center on divisions of cultural identity.
5. Cheik Hamidou Kane, *Ambiguous Adventure* (New York: Walker, 1963). Again, I thank Dr. Ahmed I. Samatar for bringing this very relevant passage to my attention.
6. Anthony Smith, *National Identity* (Reno, Nev.: University of Nevada Press, 1991): 160–61.
7. Preface to the 1958 edition of Albert Camus’s *Lyrical and Critical Essays* (New York: Vantage Books).