

Public Address

Changing Places: The Politics of International Academic Exchanges¹

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Friends and colleagues, it is an honour and pleasure to speak with you this evening both because you are both a highly distinguished audience and because you are the kind of people who can make a difference. That is, as Fulbright alumni you are uniquely positioned to help bring about some of the proposed changes I will be suggesting.

Overall, I would like to make four major points:

1. The generation and transmission of knowledge, that is research and education, are always political—explicitly or implicitly. They are efforts to persuade someone, students, a community, a society, a government, etc., to understand some element of the world, and to act to move or to change it, in ways that the purveyor of that knowledge at least believes will be beneficial to the recipients, to the larger society—and usually to himself or herself as well.
2. Specific political and institutional contexts always shape intellectual agendas, research, teaching, and academic exchanges. Furthermore, changes in those political and institutional contexts can—and often should—call for substantially rethinking and recasting intellectual agendas, research, teaching, and exchanges.

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3. There have long been major asymmetries or inequalities in the Fulbright and other international exchange programs. These asymmetries are often rhetorically framed in terms of 'mutual benefits'. In reality, they often represent instances of divergent and deeply unbalanced power and self interest. In the process they undercut true collaboration, and actually reduce the value of the exchanges to both parties.

4. The current political and institutional conjunction, with the US becoming the hegemonic superpower in a globalizing world, suggests the importance of rethinking aspects of existing exchange programs—including Fulbright—and perhaps the creation of some new modalities of academic exchange. I will suggest some examples at the end of this talk, examples that may in fact require initiatives from here in South Africa and elsewhere in the world. At this point, I fear they are not likely to come from the current regime in Washington.

The Changing Political and Institutional Context

The Early Years

Let me begin with a bit of history and a broad periodization of international interests and international academic exchanges in the United States. Many academic visitors to the US are surprised that the country has no national Ministry or Cabinet level Department of Education. This is in fact the residue of an early constitutional issue; the locus of control over education. From the beginning of the country, the Founding Fathers (no Mothers then) recognized the tremendous political power, for good or ill, of control over knowledge generation and transmission. They did not trust the central government with that power, and feared the possibility of a central government propagandizing or unduly shaping the thinking of the population for its own ends. Control over education was therefore explicitly devolved to the individual states, producing an extremely heterogeneous 'system', often involving further devolution of control of content to counties, cities, and localities.

One result was that unlike most of Europe with its early State university systems, the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth century US colleges & universities were private. Institutions like Harvard, Yale, Princeton, Columbia,

etc., and many others, were founded by local religious congregations and communities. Given those origins, they primarily taught theology, classics, ancient history, rhetoric, law, philosophy, and natural science. They conceived of their role as training an elite for rule, or more kindly put, to guide the larger community of society, through the state and the pulpit. However, they stood clearly outside the control of the national state, and had little or no interest in foreign policy or international affairs.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries one sees the creation of the great land grant state colleges and universities, in e.g., California, Illinois, Wisconsin, New York, etc. These are explicitly not, however, national or federal institutions. They were seen as training institutions for the development of the individual states. With that in mind they concentrated on 'practical' subjects: agriculture, commerce, engineering, economics, the professions, etc. Their concerns were domestic US issues, development, and individual social mobility. Like the private universities before them, they had negligible international interests or capacities.

It is striking that even US colonialism in the Philippines produced remarkably few scholars of the Philippines; the limited literature on that country through its independence in 1947, is largely by colonial administrators. Much the same is true of the early literature on the colonized Native American populations. In contrast with the UK, the US had no equivalent to the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) designed to provide academic and practical training for their colonial administrators. Nor did the US have large colonial student populations interacting with local academics as was common in London, Paris, and Madrid (if not Brussels, or Lisbon).

At the same time, and up through the Great Depression, the large immigrant populations entering the US from central, eastern and southern Europe were largely poor, relatively uneducated, non-scholarly, and fundamentally focused on becoming American, and upward economic and social mobility in the US. Aside from the small band of Jewish scholars fleeing Germany in the 1930s, few of the immigrants coming to the US were particularly interested in or knowledgeable about international affairs or academic analyses of the countries they had left behind.

As a consequence, at the beginning of the Second World War US universities had very few academics who know much about the world beyond the US. The US intellectual historian, Tom Bender, in his recent study of US universities and colleges in 1940, could find only 60 PhDs on the non-Western world—and almost all of them were focused on antiquity.

In effect, prior to the Second World War, the US was an isolationist country, largely ignorant of and uninterested in the rest of the world. It was dragged late into World War One, and Woodrow Wilson's efforts with the League of Nations were deemed at best a tragic failure. Essentially, through the 19th and first decades of the 20th centuries, the US was primarily concerned with conquering the frontier, the Civil War, race, domestic economic and industrial development, and the integration of foreign migrants. With two vast oceans protect it, keeping distant and as disengaged as possible from Europe, Asia, and Africa. Washington's plea in his Farewell Address for the US to 'avoid entangling alliances' still seemed plausible and desirable. It took the direct attack on Pearl Harbour to bring the US into World War Two, two years after it had begun in Europe.

The Second World War and the Immediate Post War Period

The Second World War saw intense US military engagements worldwide and subsequent extended occupations in Japan and Germany. It generated a set of fascinating Army manuals on local customs, how to survive in enemy territory, and what to expect from and how to treat the natives, but little in depth knowledge or serious scholarship. The one seeming exception at the time was Ruth Benedict's, 'The Chrysanthemum and the Sword', on Japanese culture and behaviour, since recognized as a classic in superficial and stereotypic analysis.

More generally, from 1945 to 1950 the European allies were in shambles, the Cold War with the Soviet Union was heating up, efforts and expectations of decolonization were intensifying all across Asia and Africa, China had been 'lost', and the 'Domino Theory'—that one country after another would topple to communist movements—was rampant. Although the US and its allies had won the war, officials at the Ford, Rockefeller and Carnegie foundations along with a number of government leaders, including Senator Fulbright, saw this new context as deeply threatening to US interests and security. They argued that it was essential that the US protect those interests, spread its influence world wide, and generally play a much more activist and central role in world affairs.

There was, however, as noted above a severe problem; a lack of capacity. Very few Americans had more than minimal and superficial expertise on societies, culture, politics, and dynamics elsewhere in the world. For examples, a rigorous search of academe, government, journalism, and business

only turned up 40 Americans who had any expertise on the vast swath of Asia from Pakistan through India, Southeast Asia, and the Philippines. For Africa there were even fewer.

From the Late 1940s to 1968

The institutional responses to this situation were substantial, taking the form of US support for, and varying degrees of control over, the United Nations, the Bretton Woods Institutions, the Marshall Plan, Point IV (eventually becoming the US Agency for International Development), as well as vastly expanded intelligence services. At the same time, large, continuing, and generously funded international research, training, and exchange programs were established by the Ford and Rockefeller Foundations, the Fulbright program, and several major US universities. The common rationale underlying these programs was that US security and interests required the progress and spread of capitalism and democracy as opposed to totalitarian communism. Aside from often propping up right wing dictatorships and counter-insurgency activities, that in turn called for political stability which it was presumed would only follow from economic development and social and political modernization. As a consequence, development economists and political scientists became central actors in these programs, and research, training, and exchange in those two fields were given high priority.

Fulbright and the Ford Foundation took the leadership in the fellowship programs. Thousands of US graduate students and academics were selected and funded to conduct research abroad, learn languages, and study processes of social, economic and political change. The goal was to produce a large new generation of international and regional specialists for US higher education where they could train others, but also for US policy making, US personnel in international organizations, US intelligence analyses, the international business world, etc.

Fulbright and the Ford Foundation (as well as USAID) also provided thousands of fellowships for people from other countries to study at US universities. The goals were multiple; certainly to learn useful analytic and technical skills, but also imbibe US values and culture, to identify with the US and its goals, and to build long-term friendships—which would be useful when they returned home and became leaders in their own countries. Underlying these programmes was a presumption that the US had and exemplified the

models and techniques—social, political, economic, even cultural, and certainly organizational, that would solve the problems of the rest of world. In effect, it treated other societies as *tabula rasa*, blank slates, followed by at least an implicit, and often quite explicit, mantra: do as the United States does, follow the US model (in whatever field), and all will be well. As naive as that might seem today, it was a commonplace in the US government, foundations, and general populace up to 1968. Of course the Soviet, UK, and French governments were all mounting similar programs from similar positions, and with their own but comparable, competitive, and self-interested political agendas.

Within the international oriented US universities, however, alternative or counter views and serious tensions were developing. As US students and academics got to know other countries, their unique histories and dynamics, their languages, social institutions, cultures, religions, etc., they began to find things of value in them. They also began to perceive the irrelevancies and downsides of imposed US models, as well as the inequities, corruption, and violence that so often went along with the US emphasis on political stability that the US was promoting. Many academics began to chafe, critique, and counter narrowly defined US self-interest as the rationale or justification for their international research and teaching. As a result, the previously taken for granted discourse and programs supporting US style development and modernization were increasingly questioned. These critiques came not just from some radical left, but by very mainstream scholars as well. Lloyd and Suzanne Rudolph's 1967 volume, 'The Modernity of Tradition: Political Development in India', was a classic case in point.

1968, the Vietnam War, and into the 1980s

The Vietnam War crystallized and mobilized the powerful academic critiques of US policies abroad. Teach-ins and protests against the War, and latent or manifest US imperialism, broke out all across US campuses. Among others, these protests ultimately led to the downfall of the Johnson and Nixon presidencies, and the withdrawal (in effect the defeat) of US troops from Vietnam. All across the world, including the US, 1968 through the early 1970s were times of greater reflexivity, questioning and critiquing of established values and the Establishment. It saw the flowering of numerous alternative and counter cultures. Academic research, teaching, and exchange programs put

much more emphasis on cultural issues and humanistic domains—religion, language, literature, art, drama, music, and people's, not just elite, history. Many more academics and students began to press their own personal academic or intellectual agendas (as opposed to narrowly defined US 'national interests') as the rationale for internationally oriented scholarship. 'Small is Beautiful', 'basic needs', 'participatory development' became the new rallying cries, and subjects of study and exhortation. The goal was now much closer to understanding, even joining forces with other cultures and traditions, and not just or largely replacing them with US models or counterparts.

Although I did not quite realize at the time, I was myself part of this shift when, with a new PhD in Anthropology, I joined the Ford Foundation staff in Manila in 1970. My major responsibilities at the Foundation were to help organize two new institutions; the Philippine Social Science Council with an initial program focused on local history and the dynamics of social change, and the Council on Living Traditions charged to study and enlarge appreciation of local cultural and expressive forms. This mandate was in stark contrast to the Foundation's prior focus on economic planning and public administration. In effect, the earlier emphasis on narrowly conceived economic development and political modernization, based on US models, had shifted to new concerns with history, and indigenous concepts, understandings, expressions, and values. In the process, over the 1970s, economists withdrew from their earlier international activities and, as a field, development economics largely disappeared.

The Middle 1980s, to 9/11, to now—the Pendulum Swings Back Again, Harder

From the early 1980s, the pendulum began swinging back again the other way, triggered by Maggie Thatcher, Ronald Reagan, the subsequent fall of the Berlin Wall, the collapse of the Soviet Union, and opening and capitalist shift in China. Economists came roaring back to international advising, but now espousing 'shock therapy', withdrawal of the State, privatization, and free trade. By 1990, the new neo-liberal dispensation, the 'Washington Consensus', took hold with IMF policy based lending, World Bank demands for Structural Adjustment, back by the US Treasury, and falsified accounts of East and Southeast Asian 'miracles' and models. (State-led and regulated development in these regions was distorted as examples of free trade neo-liberal practices.)

At the same time discourses and processes of globalization were increasingly presented as inevitably producing convergence and homogenization. The claim was now, 'TINA', 'There Is No Alternative', to neo-liberal globalization processes, despite, and in the face of, obviously growing national and international inequalities and inequities. Somewhat more modest than 'globalization', seemingly new processes of 'transnationalism' were both growing and receiving greater recognition. However, while often celebrated, closer inspection suggested that transnational processes also often involved simply narrower means of creating asymmetrical linkages.

In this new context, Fulbright, USAID, and other exchange programs continued to bring large numbers of foreign students and scholars to the US to be trained in the new neo-liberal paradigm and orthodoxy. Paraphrasing President Bush, the underlying claim was 'you, or your country, are either with us—or nowhere'.

Fortunately, at least by my lights, US universities still retain a residue or generation of scholars and critics with more autonomous intellectual agendas, willing and able to articulate the diverse trajectories of different nations, to describe or imagine alternative possibilities, and to counter and dissect the new orthodoxies, as well as current efforts to naturalize US hegemony, and a new Imperium. Thus although current political leadership in the US has re-emphasized a US-centric model of how the world should develop, and one that gives priority to one version of US interests and security, these views are often critiqued and contested on the US campuses. The tensions between academe and the Bush regime are intense and therefore it should not be surprising that US universities have been major centers of the anti-Iraq war movement—and in consequence are often attacked by the administration and the political right as 'disloyal and unpatriotic'.

Some Conclusions and Suggestions

I hope it is clear from this rapid sketch that while domestic and international politics certainly influence internationally oriented academic agendas, at least portions of US academe now have sufficient strength to retain a degree of critical autonomy. Inevitably these tensions and conflicts shape what both US and foreign students and scholars study, and why, and how (and what gets funded). The large Fulbright, Ford Foundation, and USAID fellowship programs are necessarily caught up in these intellectual/political differences,

debates, and fashions. USAID programs are of course most vulnerable to government pressures, Ford Foundation least so, with Fulbright programs somewhere in the middle. They are somewhat protected by the Council on the International Exchange of Scholars, the Fulbright Programs' 'Board of Directors', composed of academics. But ultimately, like other government-funded bodies, its members are selected by the incumbent administration. In effect, US politics and US academe have been in a variously in-sync, and out-of-sync, ballet—a struggle for control and autonomy. Exchange programs necessarily reflect this.

It is also crucial to note that while defined as mutually beneficial, exchange programs also regularly reflect the asymmetries of interests and power of the countries and institutions involved. US Fulbright students and scholars do critical archival or field studies abroad; in villages, neighbourhoods, factories, unions, government agencies and programs, etc. Other US Fulbright academics abroad teach US perspectives, models, experience, and disciplines. In contrast, Fulbright (and Ford, Rockefeller, USAID, etc) fellows from other countries go to the US for degrees, or catch up on US disciplines or fields. They help internationalize US campuses and now some teach as well. However, they are rarely funded to conduct comparable critical research on US villages, neighbourhoods, factories government agencies, etc. They have been sent to learn what US scholars—and not their own research questions— have to tell them. Those coming to do 'American Studies' are not an exception. Rather than doing their own research on the US, they sit in classes of US professors providing US interpretations of US society and culture. Critical external studies of the US are largely left to foreign journalists.

In part this is understandable; many countries needing to build or rebuild their universities believe they simply need scholars trained in the standard disciplines, even if the concepts, theories, models, and experience they are drawn from are Euro-centric, parochial (however 'universalistic' their claims), and often (however unconsciously) self-interested. This is doubly unfortunate. It is unfortunate because it reduces the possibility and undercuts the value of 'insider' vs. 'outsider' perspectives and debates. In effect, it truncates research agendas, and produces no Alexis de Tocquevilles or Gunnar Myrdals to do critical analyses, or to illuminate little recognized elements, of US society, culture, and politics. And Americans, notoriously un-reflective and triumphalist in their sense of self and their country clearly need to be confronted with others, outsiders, views of them.

In addition, the rest of the world needs deeper and much more critical understanding of the US—of what it is, and what it is not. The US is often taken as a model for other societies. Yet when compared with other countries, on most social and political dimensions, the US is a very peculiar place with a very particular history, culture, and set of institutions. This seems especially important to recognize given the current powerful pressures to ‘globalize’ US culture, politics, economics, and the Bush administrations’ post 9/11 military, security, ‘war on terrorism’ demands on the rest of the world. These pressures are reshaping nations, politics, and lives everywhere. Better inside and outside understandings of this behemoth would be to everyone’s benefit.

I would like to think these observations might have some useful implications for thinking about the current Fulbright programs and perhaps suggest consideration for some new modalities for international academic exchanges generally. These might include:

- Programs for South African (and other) scholars and advanced students to conduct critical studies of the US, comparable to the studies that US Fulbrighters are funded for overseas;
- Encouragement for ‘sandwich programs’ in which students doing advanced degrees in their home universities in South Africa (and elsewhere) bring their own research agendas for a semester or year to a US university, and not just come to imbibe US agendas, models, and disciplines.
- Programs that support serious collaborative research projects with equal skills and equivalent funding for the US and South African Fulbright participants. The goal would be to encourage more balanced ‘insider/outsider’ perspectives and debates around genuinely joint research projects on either or both countries.
- Thematically, to encourage critical studies of the global and transnational processes that stretch beyond individual countries, and that differentially shape, constrain, and may provide new openings or alternatives for contemporary societies. Such studies would include, but not be limited to the US and South Africa.

In conclusion, the Fulbright programs unquestionably have been creative and extremely useful. However, the fellowships—who gets them and what and where they study or teach—have inevitably been shaped by national and international politics. They have also been asymmetrical in different ways in and for different countries. Current world politics and institutional circumstances suggest, at least to me, the importance of some new program modalities. Given the current regime in Washington, however, the initiative and pressure for any such new modalities, will almost certainly have to come from here—from people who have experienced and care about the Fulbright Program, that is, from people like you.

