

Spring 2008

The Student Gaze

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Recommended Citation

Wilkes, Christopher D., "The Student Gaze" (2008). *All CAS Faculty Scholarship*. Paper 10.
<http://commons.pacificu.edu/casfac/10>

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Description

It is a commonplace for campuses to extol the virtues of 'International Experience', to encourage higher levels of engagement in Study Abroad programs, and to try to draw more international students to their campuses. In this article, I give an account of my own experience as a Fulbright Program Advisor and Study Abroad faculty member.

Disciplines

Sociology

Comments

A version of this paper was published in *Rendezvous*, Spring 2008, Idaho State University.

The Student Gaze¹

Christopher Wilkes

Introduction

As I sit down to write this article, I am preparing to take a class of twenty six undergraduates to Paris for a course on the sociology and anthropology of food. With two other colleagues, I am organizing our party to dive deeply into French cuisine, to eat and to understand differently, and have the students do some detailed research on what they experience. In what follows, I give an account of my own experience as a Fulbright Program Advisor and Study Abroad faculty member, using Ben Feinberg's article on what little Study Abroad does for students² as a starting point, and referring, as well, to John's Urry's much-celebrated 'The Tourist Gaze'.³

It is a commonplace for campuses to extol the virtues of 'International Experience', to encourage higher levels of engagement in Study Abroad programs, and to try to draw more international students to their campuses. The general thesis about internationalism is so well-rehearsed that it has become trite. We need to create global citizens because we live in a global world – that's how the saying goes. But of course that cliché hides as much as it reveals, like all truisms. Why do we want to create global citizens? Is it so that our imperial ambitions are more readily realized, whether these ambitions are economic, political, military or spiritual? Should we, for example, be sending out larger armies of evangelical activists to engage the globe more fully? Or do we have a practical intent - are we ensuring the livelihoods of our graduates by extending their fields of possible employment? Is this strategy of internationalism just the most recent stage of economic expansion, which is preparing the business leaders of the future to feel just as comfortable in Beijing as they do in New York, thus smoothing the path towards a limitless Free Trade zone?

Of course, the founders of many of our international programs had different, and they would say, higher, ideals in mind when they created programs to support international education. J. William Fulbright famously hoped that the machinery of war could forever be turned in an ameliorative direction by the establishment of a program that would send young people overseas.⁴ They would travel in order to create a profound understanding of how other people live, and of the problems they face. We would learn from one another. His view, hardened by war, and made compelling by the massive human tragedies that accompanied World War Two, has evolved into an iconic structure of internationalism, with many measurable advantages accruing to those who participate, and to the countries most centrally engaged in the process.

¹ A version of this paper was published in *Rendezvous*, Spring 2008, Idaho State University.

² The Chronicle of Higher Education, Chronicle Review, May 3, 2002. Point of View. *What Students Don't Learn Abroad*, by Ben Feinberg.

³ John Urry, *The Tourist Gaze*, Second Edition, London, Sage, 2002.

⁴ From the J. William Fulbright link at the Fulbright web-page, we read:

'In November 1944, (J. William Fulbright) was elected to the U.S. Senate and served there from 1945 through 1974, becoming one of the most influential and best-known members of the Senate. His legislation establishing the Fulbright Program slipped through the Senate without debate in 1946. Its first participants went overseas in 1948, funded by war reparations and foreign loan repayments to the United States. This program has had extraordinary impact around the world. There have been more than 250,000 Fulbright grantees and many of them have made significant contributions within their countries, as well as to the overall goal of advancing mutual understanding.'

The Ben Feinberg Argument.⁵

The claims that Feinberg has made in the Chronicle of Higher Education, and at such venues as the NEH seminar in Oaxaca last summer have given rise to powerful counter-swells of argument. There are seven main elements to his view. *First*, he argues that many Study Abroad students learn less about the culture they are visiting than they do about themselves, and what they learn about themselves is what they already know. Thus, rather than expanding their horizons, they merely wrap their global experience with the shroud of their own self-absorption. *Second*, he claims that anthropologists and cultural studies specialists write many of the current TV commercials about the global market. As a consequence, some of our sharpest minds, and people who should know better, are mere tools of the global machine of buying and selling. *Third*, 'Other Cultures' become part of our global market economy –Tibetan monks, Masai warriors, the most sacred elements of these precious communities - all are grist for the mill. He sees no sense of irony here, in the case, for example, of the elder, who after much thought, comes up with the mantra 'Audi'. *Fourth*, this leads to a condition in which American domination is everywhere, and everywhere exalted – domination of global nature by SUVs, by swaggering, extreme sports youths, by hip business people seeing through authenticity to another commercial opportunity. America, the message sings, is greater than nature. There is no 'outside' to the outside world any more. *Fifth*, the result of this semiotic domination is that the world is seen merely as a large theme park in which our students are free to play. In a new form of modern solipsism, other cultures come to exist, in this latest reincarnation, only as forms of imagination in our heads. Cultures are constructed and sustained simply to extract tourist dollars from visitors. They have no reason to exist other than to entertain us, and to play a part in the global marketplace. *Sixth*, students already know the world of globalized postmodern capitalism before they travel. This line of reasoning argues that Starbucks is already on every street corner, metropolitan consciousness is universal, and that a deep cynicism attends any student travel beyond American borders. So, *finally*, Feinberg reasons, we should do more to penetrate this 'gaze'.

I will want to say more about Feinberg's well-crafted and imaginatively-written piece below, but for the moment, I want simply to underscore the reason why these views create such a backlash. It is because of *his* profound cynicism and nihilism, as much as it is about the cynicism of others, as in his account of student ennui and the tired worldliness he reports. He seems to miss the point about the incompleteness of American domination unless it's in the imagination of Wall Street mavens or Pentagon war planners, and his story gives no credit at all to students, not to mention anthropologists and cultural studies analysts, to penetrate this all-embracing view, and come up with fresh interpretations.

Fulbright

Most people in the international education community are thoroughly familiar with Fulbright and what it does. Actually, it's a pretty complex set of programs, mostly underwritten by the U.S. State Department. As well as sending our students overseas in the most familiar part of

⁵ I paraphrase the Feinberg argument here very loosely, but I have tried to reproduce accurately the substance of his claims.

the program, it also draws many students from overseas to the United States for graduate education, and to teach non-English languages here. And, as well as sending U.S. academics to campuses elsewhere, in a less well-known strategy, it invites American administrators to participate in sharing 'expertise'. There are programs for teachers; even MTV is involved. Again, of course, one could be cynical about this. This is, from one view, 'soft imperialism'. Here we go again, selling our ideological wares through State Department channels to countries who are too weak to resist us.

My own experience as a Fulbright advisor and as a previous Fulbright awardee is otherwise. I was a radical young student when Fulbright brought me to Stanford, and my theoretical reasoning was directly challenged in the lush halls of the Palo Alto campus. I cannot say my politics was changed by Stanford, but I was altered decisively in two ways. First, I was able to experience the everyday humanity of ordinary Americans and members of the academic community, which was a valued counterweight to the political and media presence that the U.S. has in the world system. Second, my theoretical reasoning was greatly sharpened and improved, and this had a long-lasting effect on my work. I spent two years in the bowels of the graduate library reading French structuralism, and went back to New Zealand with very strong views about the limits of the market, and became a firm advocate for its alternatives. I have to say I've seen this experience, the experience of developing a critical consciousness, repeated many times among my own students. At Pacific University in Forest Grove, we send ten to fifteen applicants in each year to the undergraduate Fulbright program. The process of advising is extremely rewarding and, I believe, a significant event in the lives of young scholars. I've seen again and again that the very process of sitting a twenty year-old down to fill out an application to go overseas requires some serious self-reflection. Self-absorption quickly goes out of the window, and we are soon in the business of getting to know countries we know little about initially. Attempting to create convincing projects in a new country, and often in a new language, requires all the resources of the most gifted of our students. It often stimulates students to get on the phone or the email and have long conversations with social scientists in Nigeria, laboratory chiefs in Germany, biologists in Ecuador, and, most impressively on one occasion, a discussion with a French-speaking president of a college in Togo, a successful one, I might add.

And the writing of the project statement is just one part of the Fulbright application. Developing the personal statement⁶ is even more demanding. Here they are asked to make logical what is often arbitrary and capricious, as Bourdieu wryly exposes in his piece 'The Biographical Illusion'.⁷ On a single page, a student is asked to set out their biography, to show how, inevitably, Fulbright should be part of their immediate future, and to indicate what they plan to do for the rest of their lives. In the film 'Moonstruck', the main character, who is a small-time book-keeper with firm moral and cultural views, has an affair with her fiancé's brother. Disconcerted by her 'fall from grace' as she sees it, she goes to confession. She reels off a grocery list of trivial missteps, and then slips in the report of her sexual dalliance along with the groceries, as it were. The priest doesn't catch it immediately, and then, almost, as an afterthought, he realizes what's been said, and asks her to repeat it. 'Loretta', he says, 'Consider your life'. It's the same with Fulbright. There are a lot of trivial

⁶ The 'Personal Statement' used to be called the Curriculum Vita', but it seemed so incongruous, compared to CV's academics throw around that the title was recently changed.

⁷ Bourdieu, P. (1987). The biographical illusion. *Working Papers and Proceedings of the Centre for Psychosocial Studies* (University of Chicago) 14, 1-7.

questions to answer when you apply, but then they slip in the big one - 'Consider your life'. Many students who come to my office, and many are exceptionally talented students, have never fully charted out their next steps, and certainly they are unclear about what they plan to do with their careers. Fulbright, I have come to understand over the years, is actually asking them an even bigger question, which is what they intend to be their life's work – what do they take to be their vocation for the next several years. It is therefore not surprising that students go through many attempts before something plausible comes up. But unless a student can show that they have given some serious thought to the contribution they plan to make to the global community, they often fail to make it through the competition.

And, of course, this is just a beginning. The project itself, for those who are successful, is life-altering in all the cases I've known. Even for those who don't make it through the competition, there's a decided shift in the way they think about what they'll do next because of the demands of the application process, and the questions that were asked. For those who do actually go overseas, it's hard to exaggerate the importance of the experience. At Pacific, we've had a student visit Guatemala to talk to communities torn apart by civil war and attempted genocide. Living in a small village with people who have lost family members, and who exist in constant fear cannot but change one's worldview dramatically. A young woman visits India for a year, and bursts into tears when she enters an American supermarket after she returns. It's the forty kinds of blush wines that have done it. When extreme poverty is all one sees day in and day out, the wild excesses of our daily lives become unbearable. A third goes to rural Nigeria to work with some of the poorest people in the world, and to try to understand the problem of obstetric fistula. She has already visited this part of the world, and has seen unimaginable horrors. Among these rural Muslim women, she is fully covered from head to toe. She plans to work on these issues for the foreseeable future. These challenges are the true antidote to cynicism.

John Urry's 'The Tourist Gaze'⁸

The sociologist John Urry begins his account of tourism with Michel Foucault and the medical gaze. He uses an extract from Foucault to focus on the way that doctors 'gaze' at a human body with very specific intent, a gaze that is shaped by training, by expertise and by institutions. He claims, as with medicine, that tourism involves us going away with intent to gaze on scenes, and that this gaze is socially organized and systematized by experts.

There is no single form of 'gaze' involved here, and the educational gaze is merely one of many. But what is more certain is that the gaze in all cases is organized in relation to the 'Other', to something different than us. It is a gaze constructed to view pleasure and difference. It focuses our gaze on the eccentric and the unusual – the museum, the church, the 'view' which is then captured, filmed and taken home. People look for what is 'not them'.

Tourism, whether educational or otherwise, is defined by its opposition to normal work. We travel through space away from home, and we expect to return to the 'normal', whether in the classroom or the workplace. Educational tourists, like others, linger over the gaze, reflect on it, and try to capture it in photographs, films, notebooks and academic projects. Most importantly, tourism is sign-based. We are less interested in the specific

⁸ John Urry, *The Tourist Gaze*, Second Edition, London, Sage, (2002). Here I paraphrase certain key elements of Urry's argument.

objects we meet for the first time than we are with the meanings that they throw off. Paris is lovers kissing, or people sitting in a café. Thus, we are looking everywhere for signs of Frenchness.⁹ And it's quite clear that this gaze, and consequently, this way of forming meaning, is socially constructed with very conscious intent by experts with a particular tourist experience in mind.

Urry argues that tourism has always been about fake events, because the 'real', whatever that is, is hard to take. We need our tourism packaged. Thus the tourist gaze, whether it be ecological, educational or therapeutic, results from a long history of making cultures what tourists need them to be. But as Cohen points out, tourists come in various shapes and sizes, and many escape the plans that have been made for them.¹⁰ In other words, tourists travel for various reasons, are organized to a greater or lesser extent, and experience a variety of outcomes.

Finally there is a 'ludic' quality to tourism, a sense in which playfulness is at the centre of things. And, following Campbell,¹¹ people daydream whether at home, or as a tourist. And one of the familiar daydreams that we experience in the tourist setting is to imagine a life other than the one we have. Tourism gives concrete form to these imaginings by showing us other ways of life in practical terms that we can understand. We can use these experiences to construct our own futures differently. And while Fulbrights are not simple tourists, they are sophisticated educational visitors whose view of their new country is greatly shaped by the institutions that send them, even if the 'gaze' they construct commonly escapes the bounds of these same institutions.

The Student Gaze

So what does all this tell us about the 'student gaze' and what international education might offer in general. Following Urry, it's obvious, first of all, that there are wide variations in the length and in the intensity of the overseas experience, and that it's hard to penetrate as deeply as the Fulbright experience in a few weeks away on a Study Abroad course. But I think the key is to start with the pitfalls that Feinberg sets out, and to get the student gaze to focus beyond the obvious. We joke in our food course that there's an 'F' waiting for anyone seen ducking into a McDonalds in Paris. Students don't take long to get the point, and they don't need much encouragement to avoid the obvious.

Second, the educational gaze is more susceptible to change than the general tourist gaze, of course, and students at a particular age are especially susceptible. In the case of Fulbright, there's anecdotal information that some students stay in the capital cities, sticking closely to what they know, and hanging out with other urban, highly educated young people who are easily 'interpreted'. But this experience is unusual in my own experience. The problem is usually of the opposite kind. Students not infrequently come back, and their perspective, their gaze, is so changed that they can't live at home any more. In fact, the whole question of home becomes problematic. So if we're serious about international education, and if we do it right, we'd better be ready for some individuals to be utterly altered, and their sense of themselves and their country to become far more discerning and

⁹ Jonathan Culler, *The Pursuit of Signs – semiotics, literature, deconstruction*. Cornell University Press, Ithaca, New York, (1981), in Urry, page 3.

¹⁰ Cohen, (1988) in Urry, op. cit. page 9.

¹¹ Campbell, Colin, *The Romantic Ethic and the Spirit of Modern Consumerism*. Oxford and Blackwell, New York, New York (1987) , cited in Urry,, op. cit. page 9.

critical. As this form of experience expands, and more people are altered, the very sense we have ourselves as a nation might tilt just slightly.

Third, careful preparation is the key. Fulbright, I think, asks a lot of those they support, and few would say they're not prepared when they go. But as every anthropologist knows, whatever planning has taken place prior to entering the field, it can all go wrong once you get there. But training and preparation will help rejig the plans and get things going again. Indeed, it's in this process of rejigging that the most important learning takes place, if the blogs we read from our students are any indication. Without preparation, they have little to fall back on when things run awry, but without challenges, the learning involved is less valuable. What should happen, of course, is that students gain confidence to use what they know in a wide range of circumstances, a situation that gives them skills to enter graduate schools and professions with more assurance and flexibility than otherwise.

Can Fulbright be reproduced in small courses? Some of what Fulbright does can be reproduced in different settings, I think, and anyway in these shorter classes, we have different goals. But like Fulbright, preparation is the key. Setting goals for the course that emphasize depth and detail, rather than treating the course just as an attempt to shop in another country, is obviously crucial. If you're teaching about food, ask student to hang out for two hours in a French or Italian market. Pick ones that the locals use. Insist they talk to people and sample the food. Emphasize detail. Ask for five pages of single spaced notes, and do this several times in various settings, in restaurants or at vineyards. The immediate nervousness of the situation soon disappears, and students sink quickly into new ways of seeing the world. People are generally nice to students, and can't wait for them to try the food. They, in turn, come back with stories told with enthusiasm about the strangeness and novelty of what they've seen, who they've talked to, and what they tasted. It doesn't work with them all, but it does for many.

Fourth, if Urry is right, and the 'Tourist Gaze' is 'constructed', we'd better as educators make sure that the student gaze we help 'make' is directed towards the outcomes we value and hope to see emerge in our students. It's preposterous and wasteful to send students overseas if they come back only with the confirmation of the prejudices they took with them in the first place. The whole point is to aim for a shift in the student gaze, so being very precise about what you want to see happen, and putting in place ways of measuring these results is very important. And I think those tasks are best achieved by a mixture of very clear and precise projects to be completed overseas, coupled with enough time for students to spread out into the culture on their own time, and make their own judgments.

Finally, we might ask ourselves what we want out of all of this. If we were Adam Smith writing in the 18th century, the answer is obvious. We'd want to spread free trade, and ideas about free trade, as far as we can, not merely to enhance our own economic well-being, but to expand democracy, and to allow other nations to gain equally in the system of economic growth that he believed in. Present-day imperial ideas are not far from this view, and Fulbright encourages and supports business fellowships. But there's much more at stake than economics. At issue at the base is whether we can construct our futures differently, and whether we can imagine these futures differently. International education at its best ought to introduce us to new social logics derived from 'elsewhere'. What some of us hope is that we can accept that other people are rational when they make decisions that are 180 degrees different to ours, because then a more constructive global community is possible, higher levels of international cooperation are possible, and better levels of global

well-being are possible. Then, following Fulbright, there's a chance that we can use our global knowledge collectively to meet the many global challenges we still face.

But students usually get this already. They already know about the African Aids epidemic, about Darfur, and about what's going on in China. It's up to us to give them a start towards getting involved with these communities beyond our shores. If we've done our job right, they'll get the help from us that they need to tackle larger issues than most of us have ever had to face, and as they succeed and report back, they'll remind us of why we bothered with all this in the first place.