

U.S. Universities -- Not So Innocent Abroad?

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June 30, 2015

American universities are enjoying boom times abroad. Many of the most prestigious have established branch campuses overseas and launched collaborations with foreign governments and institutions of higher education, particularly in Asia and the Middle East. While numerous programs deal with science and technology, of special interest are undertakings to bring the advantages of liberal education to countries that do not protect liberty of thought and discussion.

The tension is real and the stakes large. In an age in which developments in transportation and communication have intertwined national economies to an unprecedented extent, it is to be expected that American educators would seek to disseminate liberal education around the world—to enhance their reputations, improve their bottom lines, and benefit America by fostering knowledge of the principles, and cultivating the spirit, of freedom.

But can liberal education remain true to its core mission—transmitting knowledge of the humanities and sciences, fostering reasoned inquiry, promoting disinterested scholarship, and encouraging lively debate—in illiberal settings?

Jim Sleeper, a lecturer in political science at Yale University, doubts it. An accomplished journalist who for many years has been writing with flair and moral urgency about the degradation of liberal education on American campuses, Sleeper discerns a sinister impulse in the ambitions of university administrations to expand beyond America's shores. The root of the problem, he argues in "Innocents Abroad? Liberal Educators in Illiberal Societies," the featured article in the summer issue of *Ethics and International Affairs*, is the same as the problem that is corrupting liberal education at home—capitalist greed.

Sleeper appreciates that university administrators' motives are mixed and higher ideals are also at work. "A quasi-missionary zeal" to spread liberty and democracy, he argues, "is one of the 'spiritual' reasons why American universities export at least 83 of the world's nearly 219 branch campuses ... Thirteen of these American branch campuses are in China, seven are in Singapore, and fourteen can be found in Qatar and the United Arab Emirates." He adds that "there are hundreds more American university offices, research projects, pedagogical programs, and other engagements abroad."

Even when American universities are operating at their most high-minded, Sleeper doubts that they can overcome "the illiberal character of hosts and partners in authoritarian regimes." By "licensing out professors, intellectual property, and institutional prestige to

regimes bent on other purposes,” he warns, “American universities may be legitimizing such regimes more often than liberalizing them.” By acceding to the restrictions imposed on academic freedom by authoritarian host regimes, moreover, American universities “may be offering students in those countries too narrow and instrumental a curriculum, compromising liberal education’s ethos and mission and, not incidentally, reinforcing and implicitly ratifying similar compromises at home.”

The chief cause of the overreach abroad and consequent “compromise... [of] academic integrity at home,” Sleeper maintains, is that trustees and administrators operate “like managers of business corporations in the global marketplace.” In the zeal to spread its “brand name” and increase market share, the elite American university has become “a global business corporation more than a self-governing, civic-republican company of scholars.”

Sleeper has been among the most eloquent critics of Yale’s 2009 decision to establish Yale-National University of Singapore College (Yale-NUS), funded entirely by Singapore. The Yale administration only informed the faculty after it had signed the deal with Singapore and has to this day not shared with faculty the full terms of the arrangement.

The faculty has good reasons for qualms. Singapore restricts press freedom, subjects government critics to show trials, denies rights to more than 1 million migrant workers who constitute a quarter of its population, harasses professors whose teaching or scholarship it dislikes, and lacks an independent judiciary. In 2012, Yale’s faculty passed a resolution introduced by professor Seyla Benhabib (to whom Sleeper is married) expressing concern about the ability of Yale-NUS to protect the “civil and political rights” of members of the university community.

“These ideals lie at the heart of liberal arts education as well as of our civic sense as citizens,” the resolution declared, “and they ought not to be compromised in any dealings or negotiations with the Singaporean authorities.”

But is so inflexible an approach required? Might not some reasonable, short-term accommodation to local restrictions allow for the introduction of a liberal education that plants seeds, and over the long haul expands the reach, of freedom? Sleeper acknowledges that “engagement and dialogue” can work wonders in “free classrooms.” But he frets that in Singapore they will “become weasel words” mouthed by apologists for authoritarianism.

Whether Yale-NUS serves the interest of freedom is an empirical question to which we do not yet know the answer. While convincingly sketching the dangers to which the enterprise is exposed, Sleeper provides little evidence concerning whether on balance Yale-NUS is doing more to promote freedom in Singapore or to fortify authoritarianism there and corrupt Yale at home.

Yet, in his quest to call attention to threats to liberal education emanating from initiatives abroad, Sleeper ignores the most urgent menace, which is the politicization of liberal education here at home.

It is not because of the desire to curry favor with foreign autocrats that American universities have hollowed out core curricula on their own campuses. It is not because of the profit motive that universities have purged the humanities of their exhibition of the drama and complexities of moral and political life in favor of a tedious, contrived, jargon-laden jeremiad against Western civilization. It is not because of an ambition to extend their brands overseas that universities have eviscerated due process in campus disciplinary procedures. And it is not because the administration has excluded faculty from decision-making processes that universities have imposed gross restrictions on freedom of speech while inculcating in students a sense of entitlement to have their opinions go unchallenged and their feelings go unhurt.

Rather, all of these debasements of liberal education spring from a determination shared by a significant proportion of administrators and faculty—and ignored by most of the rest—to convert liberal education into a continuation of progressive politics by other means.

No doubt we Americans remain innocents abroad. The more potent danger to liberal education by far, however, is that so many of our university administrators and faculty have become snake oil salesmen at home.

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