PEDAGOGY IN INTERNATIONAL STUDIES

Living and Teaching Across Cultures

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As long as one lives within the confines of a single culture it is difficult to achieve cross-cultural awareness. Multiculturalism is often simply the tolerance of a dominant culture for minority cultures. Cross-cultural awareness is a state of mind in which one is alert to alterity, the existence of others possessing different and equally valid world views and ways of life. This can be acquired living within or alongside other cultures, when one’s own and others’ strangeness become readily apparent. Culture shock involves just such a realization. The challenge for the teacher of international relations is to convey the possibility of alterity to students in the classroom. After all, international relations is above all about the interaction between communities possessing separate identities and autonomous wills. The article discusses ways of cultivating cross-cultural awareness, comparing the difficulties of doing so in a society under siege—Israel—with the greater scope available in the cosmopolitan setting of an elite American university.

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The View from Mount Scopus

Arriving in Jerusalem in 1968 after an Oxford education triggered a crash course in cultural awareness. Traveling back to Oxford on sabbatical in 1999 after half a lifetime away produced a culture shock in reverse. Either way, it is only the jarring encounter with the unexpected and the unfamiliar that opens one’s eyes to alterity, the strangeness of one’s own and other cultures.

Living in Jerusalem/Yerushalayim/Ursalem al-Quds is to experience at first hand the different communal rhythms and ways of life of that city, central to the consciousness of Jews, Moslems, and Christians. Here the tessellated mosaic of human culture is lived, not taught. Sitting in my office on Mount Scopus among the books and photographs I look out over the Old City with its minarets, cupolas, church spires, and TV aerials. Sprawling over the ochre and olive hills of Judea, Jerusalem, contested for thousands of years, is a metaphor for the discordant cacophony of religions, languages, myths, and customs of the family of mankind. It is polycultural, not multicultural, more like Sarajevo in the old days than New York.

Walking its streets you see the Arab neighborhoods with their stone houses built onto an enclosed, inner courtyard, protecting the modesty and privacy of the family. Decorative gardens are rare and children in neat uniforms walk quietly to school. Five times a day you hear the haunting chant of the call to
prayer, now played on a tape recorder over a loud-speaker system. In the Jewish neighborhoods you can peer in through the windows at the cooking and eating. Here the yards are on the outside. Children dressed in an assortment of styles shout and jostle all the way to class. On the Sabbath work stops and a deep silence descends. Mostly, Arabs and Jews keep to their own areas. They may occasionally come into contact at work but live apart and stick to friends from their own communities. Each side really does not know what makes the other tick. Nor are they particularly interested. Moslems and Jews rarely intermarry.

This is a city of ethnic and confessional quarters, of diverse societies resonating to varied symbols and slogans. Arab Jerusalem has its clans, Jewish Jerusalem its sects. Since 1967 the equally diverse, minority Christian Arab community has seriously declined in numbers. Still, priests of all denominations—Roman Catholic, Greek and Russian Orthodox, Armenian, Copt—are a familiar site. Groups of pilgrims visit from all over the Christian world to worship at the Holy Places.

Overarching all other differences is the great religious divide of Islam and Judaism. They retain their hold over people’s hearts and minds beyond religious observance. You don’t have to believe in Judaism to be Jewish. To the outside observer they seem to possess many common features. In important senses they do resemble each other: their God is indivisible and cannot be depicted. Both are total ways of life, governed by inclusive systems of lore and law, to be lived in every waking moment. But for all their proximity, these two codes for living configure the lives of their followers along discrepant lines. Most obviously, Arabs and Jews do not declaim the same prayers, celebrate the same holidays, or respond to the same slogans. More profoundly, they have no common view of the world or humankind’s place in the overall scheme of things. They speak languages, Arabic and Hebrew, that reflect and propagate contrasting virtues, historical memories, and orderings of society. For some of each other’s ideas they lack corresponding words or attach divergent meanings to equivalent terms.

Just one example: At the heart of Jerusalem is the al-Aqsa mosque. I see it from my window. But what I see is not what my Palestinian colleague sees. For Moslems this is the First of the Two Qiblas (the direction of prayer originally adopted by Mohammed before Mecca) and the Third Holy Mosque. After Mecca and Medina it is the most revered site in Islam. From here the Prophet Mohammed ascended to heaven, and the footprint left by his steed, al-Buraq, can still be seen imprinted in the sacred rock. The vast compound on which al-Aqsa stands is known as Haram al-Sharif, the noble sanctuary. For Jews the selfsame area is called Har Habayit, the Temple Mount, site of the temples of Solomon, Nehemia, and Herod, the theological epicenter of the Jewish universe. Also known by tradition as Mount Zion and Mount Moriah, this is where Abraham offered Isaac as a sacrifice and David made his capital. The Western or Wailing Wall adjacent to the mosques is thought to be all that remains of the Herodian Temple and is Judaism’s most cherished place of worship.

Although Haram al-Sharif and Har Habayit are located at the same spatial coordinates they are totally different places, truths, and versions of history. Adherents of the two religions neither accept the other’s version nor even perceive the same reality. In their hearts they think the other side’s account is absurd. Both believe that force, not rights is the basis of the other’s presence.

The Puzzle of the Arab–Israeli Conflict

Despite the evidence staring me in the face for so long, I only began to think about the political consequences of cultural differences after the 1982 Peace for the Galilee War (as it was called in Israel). Before that I assumed that the idea of “culture” was relevant to what happened among the Hopi and Polynesians, not events in my neck of the woods. This was the obvious conclusion to draw from
the classical texts on anthropology—Margaret Mead, Rose Benedict, Max Gluckman—that I was familiar with. I changed my mind following the attempt by Israel to impose a new order on the Middle East by invading Lebanon and expelling the Palestine Liberation Organization and the Syrian army.

Israel won the war and lost the peace. Its intervention in Lebanese politics to ensure quiet on its Northern border proved counterproductive. Thousands were killed, Israel's local allies were crushed, Syria became even more dominant, and a new, more fearsome opponent, the Shi'ite Hizballah, emerged to replace the PLO. For all its intelligence expertise it was clear that the Israeli government was out of its depth. It was good at estimating the order of battle of its enemies but weak at deciphering their cultural operational codes. Conventional rational choice calculations did not work very well against the willingness for self-sacrifice of the suicide bombers or, indeed, the revenge ethic of the warring clans and sects. These bitter internecine rivalries were a source of bafflement. Israel believed that it could manipulate the local parties to its advantage. But its moral standing was undermined by the massacre of Palestinians in the Sabra and Shatilla camps by Maronite Falangists in an area under Israeli army control. Then a 1983 draft peace treaty became a dead letter when the Lebanese President, elected under Israeli and American protection, was murdered by Syrian agents. Years later, following Israel's final withdrawal from its Southern Lebanon “security zone” in June 2000, veteran Israeli diplomat Uri Lubrani acknowledged that it had all been a terrible mistake (Barnea, 2000).

Trying to make sense of what had gone wrong, I took a second look at the history of the Arab–Israeli conflict. Under the thirty-year rule for the release of government documents, much material was becoming available. I was amazed to discover the scope of contacts between Israel and the Arabs before the 1956 Suez War, including letters from Egyptian Prime Minister Nasser to Israeli Prime Ministers Ben-Gurion and Sharett. There had been, it turned out, numerous secret negotiations involving an entire cast of intermediaries. Other opportunities for a negotiated settlement had arisen after the 1967 June War. It was only after the traumatic 1973 Yom Kippur War that a first peace treaty was negotiated with Egypt.

How was this story of wasted chances for peace to be explained? A Realist account was unconvincing as evidently the parties had shared substantial interests in a settlement from the start and neither could impose its terms on the other. As early as February 1949 Egypt and Israel had committed themselves in their Armistice Agreement to a “peace settlement between the Parties” and a “permanent peace in Palestine.” Yet it was not until 1978 that they actually signed a peace treaty substantially based on the 1949 status quo.

Diplomatic historians offered various explanations. One critical account claimed that Israeli leaders had deliberately sabotaged negotiations because they wanted war to strengthen Israel’s position. Ben-Gurion and Dayan, Israel’s first prime minister and his chief of staff, were the main villains of this version. Other historians pointed to Nasser’s manipulation of anti-Israel sentiment to rally the Arab world round his popular leadership. Cold War historians could explain the wasted years by arguing that the Soviet Union sought to extend its influence at the expense of the United States by encouraging Arab bellicosity and pouring in arms. All these versions assume some degree of wickedness and farsightedness. In general, theories of malicious intention entail an inherently unsatisfactory reading of history. It is easy to blame aggressive individuals for processes involving multiple factors and deep collective forces. This is history as a stark moral saga of bad and good kings.

While attempting to understand what had gone wrong I read a great deal of cultural anthropology and ethnography. But studies of single cultures could not give me the answers I sought about the sustained Arab-Israeli failure to make
peace. Cultural analysis could certainly shed light on political institutions and patterns of behavior within a given society. But it could not explain international phenomena involving, by definition, interactions between societies. This would be like one hand clapping. Explaining international outcomes in terms of certain cultural traits also struck me as reductionist and even tautological. Finally, I was concerned that oversimplified cultural analysis would foster stereotypical thinking in the discredited tradition of “national character” studies. Ben-Gurion or Nasser’s villainy would be replaced, equally objectionably and unconvincingly, by the supposedly innate aggressive traits of Jews or Arabs. (Note, by the way, that just such negative traits are assigned by each side to the other.)

My research would have got stuck at this point had I not stumbled on an entire area of the social sciences that I had so far been unaware of: the study of intercultural communication. Largely inspired by the work of Edward T. Hall (1959), this field provided the key insight that discord may arise from the chemical reaction that occurs when cultures come into contact. An early introduction to the field was that of Condon and Yousef (1975). This was followed by a spate of valuable texts in the early 1980s (Brislin, 1981; Bochner, 1982; Gudykunst and Kim, 1984). The insight that international communication is a special case of intercultural communication stands to the special credit of Edmund Glenn, a former Department of State interpreter (1977) and Glen Fisher (1980). A number of international case studies now began to come off the press (Anand, 1981). A particularly insightful one worth mentioning examined the peculiar chemistry of Russo–Japanese negotiations (Kimura, 1980).

With the insights provided by this literature and on the basis of my reading of available government documents and firsthand accounts I was in a position to suggest the following hypothesis: that the critical breakdown in Arab–Israeli relations invariably occurred at the interface between the parties, a dislocation in the transfer of information across synapses. Even when they wanted to the parties were unable to communicate intelligibly. Left to their own devices the Israeli and Egyptian governments were quite unable to work together after President Sadat’s visit to Jerusalem in November 1977. Had it not been for the remarkable commitment of time and effort by the Carter administration, and the rivals’ profound fear of another catastrophic war, this initiative might have gone the way of all the others. The problem seemed to reside in a pattern of mutual misinterpretation.

A clear theme of cross-cultural dissonance ran through all contacts between the rivals. This dissonance was not a property of individual leaders but was a truly collective, cultural phenomenon, shared by leaders, elites, and communities. Arab–Israeli negotiations, communications, and nonverbal signaling seemed to me to be a tragedy of errors, a sustained failure of mutual understanding. Encoding messages according to its own distinctive semantic logic, neither party held the key to deciphering the other’s meaning or purpose. As I saw it, cross-cultural differences, the juxtaposition of incompatible assumptions and conventions embodied in culture and language, did not spawn war or torpedo contacts in a direct causal sense. Of course, many other factors, long and short term, were involved including the rivalry between the great powers and the fears and ambitions of leaders. But dissonance did critically short-circuit the communications networks hardwired into the diplomatic system and intended to control escalation and facilitate negotiation.

Observation of Israeli-Arab negotiations over the last decade confirms that dissonance dogged the peace process because both sides failed to learn the lessons of past failures. Throughout the 1990s Israeli–Syrian negotiations, for instance, were handicapped by the same sort of cross-cultural disjunctions that existed in the past. One serious disjunction concerned the role of public opinion. Concepts of authority and hierarchy are very different across the two cul-
tures and both parties have had difficulty understanding the relationship between the counterpart’s leader and his constituency. The Israeli view was that without confidence-building measures no agreement involving painful concessions would be feasible. The Syrian side rejected the frequently expressed need for friendly statements or gestures (Rabinovich, 1998:78–82). Syrian discourse was unremittingly hostile.

In an autopsy on the negotiations, Syrian-born Patrick Seale, President Hafiz Assad of Syria’s biographer and confidant, explained that Assad did not believe in gestures: “each leader should be responsible for his own public opinion.” It was not “Syria’s responsibility to effect a greater public opinion in favor of peace.” Uri Lubrani’s reaction to this view was that Assad “blew it.” The Syrians, he argued, in “the way they handled these negotiations, manifested a clear misunderstanding of [the] Israeli psyche, Israeli public opinion, Israeli needs. . . . Israeli public opinion is the major factor in any government’s decisions. . . . And I think the way this was handled by Syria was wrong.” Israelis would not support a peace involving the return of the Golan without being convinced of Syrian goodwill and peaceful intentions. Not only had public gestures to improve the atmosphere not been forthcoming, but Israel had been subjected to “constant diatribes, diatribes of a very sinister nature” (Washington Institute, 2000).

Teaching Intercultural Communication in Israel

My immersion in the study of intercultural communication naturally inclined me to design a course on the subject in the Department of International Relations at the Hebrew University. Israel had withdrawn to a “security zone” in Lebanon but was fatalistically taking steady losses. Relations with Egypt had lapsed into a “cold peace.” In November 1987 the first intifada broke out in the occupied territories.

Having concluded that cross-cultural dissonances could impede and derail the resolution of conflict I was eager to share this insight with our students and obtain their feedback. Many of them go on to work in the international arena in both the government and private sectors. In our department they are taught that common conventions and codes govern international relations. International law, diplomatic protocol, shared professional skills, and the English language provide an indispensable common basis for dealing with strangers. Unfortunately, these off-the-shelf tools are often inadequate for handling unusual, sensitive, and complex problems. Knowledge of other cultures and awareness of cross-cultural pitfalls were, I believed, an equally essential part of their education.

When it came to designing the course, material seemed at first to be no problem. There was a substantial introductory literature and even a supportive professional association (SIETAR, the Society for Intercultural Education, Training, and Research) publishing its own journal and promoting training in the field. Case studies, country profiles, movies, simulation games, and other educational aids were readily available. It was with high hopes, therefore, that I inaugurated a course on “Problems of Intercultural Communication in International Relations.” I persisted over several years, hoping to learn from my early mistakes. Nevertheless, the course was a failure.

By “failure” I do not mean that I failed to brainwash students into accepting my pet theories or becoming cultural relativists. To the contrary, I have always encouraged them to be critical and draw their own conclusions in term papers, not parrot things taught in the course. There is nothing more depressing than to have your own ideas spouted back at you almost verbatim. Nor do I believe that you need to abandon your own beliefs and preferences in order to understand those of other people. We are the way we are and “the local olive oil tastes best.” I mean that students remained resolutely and unrepentantly ethnocentric—closed to the idea that other cultures really do function differently from our
own. Other world views, for instance the tendency of Americans to view international affairs as a struggle between good and evil, progress and reaction, were dismissed as mere posturing.

There were, of course, successes, students who got the hang of it and wrote enthusiastic and insightful term papers on some applied problem. Often they came to the course because they had already acquired cultural consciousness from studying in Japan or traveling in India. Others, with practical experience, had actually participated in botched negotiations. One excellent student was an officer working with representatives of foreign armies. His interest was aroused when he observed his commanding officer ineptly negotiating with a European general. Another, a member of a kibbutz that ran an export business, was struck by how culturally unprepared the company’s representatives were for doing business in the Far East. On the whole, though, I doubt whether many students became sensitized by the course itself. Sadly, I was unable to elicit much interest in class, or even motivate them to read the bibliography.

Looking back in composure I discern two reinforcing difficulties, linguistic and conceptual, that I never managed to resolve: The first problem was that my material was in English, not Hebrew, and for most of our students English is a foreign language. Thus they read English texts slowly and do not understand everything. Obviously, new and complicated ideas are particular hard to grasp. If students can, they skip reading the English altogether and rely on Hebrew language summaries that they prepare for each other. Excessive emphasis is placed on lectures, since they are delivered in Hebrew. In the social sciences original Hebrew textbooks are rare and translations, if available, are often years out of date.

For ideological reasons it was long ago decided that courses at the Hebrew University have to be taught in the vernacular. One of the slogans of Zionism was “Hebrew, speak Hebrew!” Doctoral theses have also to be written in Hebrew, except in special cases. Yet for professional advancement professors are obliged to publish in English in overseas journals. No recognition is given to articles published in Hebrew, so there is little incentive to do so. This results in a wide gap between the requirements of teaching and the requirements of research. Students have little up-to-date reading material in their own tongue. Worse, after several years of military service their language skills are decidedly rusty, even when they have been satisfactorily taught English in high school, which cannot be assumed.

Another serious intellectual consequence is that many students grow up and are educated within a linguistic cocoon isolating them from the ideas and knowledge of the outside world. In my opinion, monolingualism in all cases deprives students of insight into other universes of meaning and also into idiosyncratic features of their own language. A second language provides perspective and a measuring rod. But at least English speakers have an enormous body of cutting-edge literature at their disposal in the original and in translation. Hebrew has a flourishing publishing industry but can hardly compete with the major world languages, least of all English, which dominates the natural and social sciences. Students who restrict themselves to what is after all a minor tongue are confining themselves to an intellectual ghetto.

My second serious problem, connected to the first, was an inability to overcome a number of deeply rooted prejudices held by students:

1. They had a very rigid, “primitive Realist” outlook on the Arab-Israeli conflict in general and on world affairs in particular. All that mattered was power and interests. Adroit diplomacy and communication skills were beside the point. If the clients wanted the product they would buy it anyway.
2. Surprisingly for people living in the heart of the Middle East, they were not particularly curious about other surrounding cultures. This may be connected to Israel’s isolation in the region and exposure to so much unremitting hostility over the years.

3. At the same time they were convinced that they understood “the Arabs” very well, accrediting them with stereotypical traits. Military service probably did not help here.

4. In their view, “Western” culture, represented by the American way of life, was modern and normative. Non-Western cultures were marked by outdated beliefs and customs. But this was their problem, not ours. Since the families of many students originated in non-Western countries (particularly in North Africa and the Middle East) such attitudes reflected ambivalence about their own backgrounds.

All this was ten to fifteen years ago. In some ways the situation has improved. Thanks to the dedicated teaching of my colleagues in the Department of International Relations in recent years a generation of students has been educated with a more balanced appreciation of the role of international institutions and ideas. Young people after military service also travel more widely in the Far East and South America than before. Nevertheless, the overall picture remains substantially as I have described it.

A Teaching Interlude in the United States

In the 1993–94 academic year I was invited to teach in the Department of Government at Georgetown University as a Goldmann Visiting Israeli Professor. I decided to give my course on intercultural communication a try in a new setting.

The course itself included three components. The first foundation component was a series of lectures introducing basic concepts in the field: the idea of culture, contrasting approaches to life’s major concerns, and problems of intercultural communication. I touched on such varied topics as language and persuasion, nonverbal communication, time, interior design, conflict and conflict resolution, work and leisure, gender, and child rearing. For my textbook I chose Samovar and Porter, *Intercultural Communication: A Reader* (1994) because of its comprehensiveness and sound choice of material. It includes some classic theoretical papers and also ethnographic analyses useful for the applied second stage of the course. Since Samovar and Porter does not address the special problems of international relations, I supplemented it with my own book on American negotiating across cultures (Cohen, 1991).

I found that one credible way to bring home the idea of culture was to discuss seemingly trivial but actually highly significant artifacts, such as acquiring a U.S. driving license. Key cultural differences could be rewardingly exemplified by, for instance, comparing preschool methods across societies (Tobin et al., 1989). Students were creatively surprised to discover that in the Chinese preschool described in the study small children were trained to defecate together at fixed times. Or that there was no discipline at all in the Japanese preschool and that it was only in the United States that tots were made to stand in the corner for misbehavior.

The second stage of the course was a discussion in class of a series of case studies. Drawing on the Pew case study method I invested a great deal of time researching and collating material on some recent revealing international episodes exemplifying intercultural dissonance. Put together into study packs these provided the basis for lively classroom discussion. The *New York Times* and Wash-
The Washington Post proved to be indispensable sources. Sometimes government or UN documents gave students direct access to the raw material. Foreign Broadcast Information Service translations of the foreign language media enabled me to introduce both sides of the coin into the debate. One case involved a classic spat between the U.S. and India following frank remarks made by a newly appointed assistant secretary of state. “The case of the recalcitrant prime minister” covered a crisis in Australian–Malaysian relations after the Australian prime minister unwisely dismissed Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad as “recalcitrant,” a deeply offensive concept in Malay (Cohen, 1997:38–43). Another affair involved U.S. outrage at the sentence of flogging imposed on an American teenager for alleged vandalism in Singapore. Then there was UN intervention to Restore Hope in Somalia under U.S. command. Early ideals gave way to an embittered withdrawal as a result of entanglement with local “warlords.”

My very best session revolved round the controversial subject of female circumcision or genital mutilation. A number of episodes had been reported in the press of African women claiming asylum in the United States, Canada, and France because of fear that back home their children would be subject to a custom generally regarded in the West with dismay. There is also quite a substantial literature on a subject that raises profound issues of gender roles across cultures, contradictory religious and medical beliefs, and the right of the West to interfere in other countries’ internal affairs and traditions. By good fortune I knew an Eritrean woman studying at Georgetown and she was kind enough to come along to class in order to provide an insider account of the significance of the practice in the Horn of Africa. She was not for it, but she explained why it was important to Eritrean women in the context of their own society. Students were astonished by an eye-opening encounter with a totally incongruous, but self-consistent, point of view. Clearly this kind of firsthand testimony is of inestimable value in any course on culture.

In the final third of the course students presented the preliminary results of their own research projects to their classmates. The idea was to open up discussion on subjects that students had chosen for themselves and to provide useful peer feedback. (Of course, I was also available for consultation.) About half of the class must have been foreign students from all over the world, reflecting the multicultural Georgetown University scene. This fifty–fifty mix of Americans and non-Americans produced a stimulating and tolerant environment for a mutual broadening of horizons. The range and depth of students’ interests were remarkable. Some of the papers that I eventually received were so good that I made copies that I have kept to this day. There was an enlightening paper by a Portuguese-Hindi-English-speaking woman on “The myth of Racial Democracy in Brazil,” comparing attitudes to color in Brazil and the U.S. An American air force officer produced a fine study of the origins of “North Korea’s Nuclear Quest.” A Greek woman wrote on “Macedonia: What’s in a Name?” She passionately defended Greek objections to European Union recognition of the former Yugoslav republic of Macedonia under the name “Macedonia.”

This course was the most rewarding teaching experience of my career. But I have no illusions about having found the Philosopher’s Stone. By accident I had chosen the right course for a cosmopolitan university. Obviously, students chose my course for a variety of reasons, including plain curiosity and convenience. From conversations, though, I discerned two other motives. There were those who came because the course promised to shed light on the complexities of life lived in an unfamiliar culture or on the boundaries between cultures. Others came because they wanted to say and hear it said loud and clear that non-Western cultures are valid and valuable in their own right. They are not about to be replaced and they are not inferior.
Postscript

One student whom I taught in the Georgetown class was perturbed by my entire approach. He came to me after one session to complain, good humoredly, that I was adopting a standpoint that reflected cultural relativism and was subversive of American values. I responded that the last thing I intended was to show disrespect for the beliefs and traditions of my host. By the same token he surely had to respect cultures other than his own. But this was precisely the point, he rejoined. He had been brought up to believe that his way of life was indeed better than that of others less fortunate. All those trying to get into the United States seemed to agree! Furthermore, he continued, in a conflict between one side that was prepared to see the other point of view and an opponent that was not, the one that was more single-minded would win.

I then threw in my heavy artillery. The two worst setbacks in postwar U.S. foreign policy were the Vietnam War and the fall of the Shah. Both cases, I pointed out, had involved serious failures to understand non-Western cultures. I also recalled the embarrassment of the Iran-Contra affair and Bud McFarlane’s secret mission to Teheran in September 1986 bearing “a Bible, signed by President Reagan, and a cake . . . in the shape of a key” (Shultz, 1993:784). A modicum of self-awareness, let alone insight into Shi’ite Iran, would have avoided this ludicrous episode. Bud McFarlane should have remembered the great Scottish poet Robbie Burns’s famous lines—

Oh wad some Power the giftie gie us
To see oursels as ithers see us
It wad frae mony a blunder free us,
And foolish notion.

Public discourse about international relations often reflects a self-centered, ethnocentric view of the world. In the center is the national observer, embedded in a particular cultural frame of reference, yet confident in his or her possession of a privileged, normative view of the international system. Convinced that her values are superior and rational, she sees no need to understand those of others. Judgments are passed on other nations’ supposed ways of life like grades are handed out by the teacher in high school. In extreme cases of insularity this observer may not even be aware of the possible existence of a totally different way of looking at things. (As often as not, ethnocentrism is rooted in blissful ignorance of the world.) Since the very essence of international relations is the interaction between autonomous wills endowed with their own peculiar, culturally grounded identities, solipsism is an inexcusable prejudice for anyone with the pretension to understand international relations.

In our search for generalities we should not overlook the particular. My basic philosophy of teaching, for what it is worth, is that we should help our students to grasp the elementary truth that different societies are programmed by different cultural software. Not better, not worse, just different. They have their own values, perceptions, and ways of doing things. They have a particular agenda and interpret events in the context of their concerns and semantic matrix. They make decisions, communicate, and negotiate according to their own cultural operational code, not ours. If you want to do business with strangers, either in the diplomatic or commercial sense, you do them no favor by studying their ways and adopting appropriate behavior. Quite the reverse—you do yourself a favor by increasing the chances of avoiding gratuitous error and fostering a successful outcome. All this sounds very obvious, but time and again I have discovered that people mostly project their own logic onto strangers or make stereotypical assumptions with equally negative consequences. Either way, there is no substitute for
the in-depth study of other cultures and alertness to the hidden complications on the path of intercultural relations.

References