

Trained Cynics? The Importance of Optimism in International Relations

Editorial

We are discussing the consumption and adoption of Southern culture by the North, in a class entitled, “Geography of the Developing World.” The jaded international relations students have brought up tourism and its negative ramifications on indigenous culture; have discussed property rights abuses in relation to indigenous healing; have put forward the oft-repeated view that the relationship between the North and the South is exploitative. Someone raises her hand timidly and queries,

“Maybe this interchance of cultures between the North and the South broadens horizons and identities? Maybe it creates awareness amongst those of us who are so lucky to live in the North? For humanity, this is maybe a good thing?”

My friend turns to me, mirroring my stunned look, and she says what I am sure we are all thinking: “We are so cynical! We see the good side, but we only ever talk about the negatives.”

So often we are pessimistic about the future. We get caught up in being critical and overlook the successes we have already accomplished – success captured in this year’s journal in the form of remarkably thoughtful and thought-provoking contributions from people who are genuinely interested in making a difference to this world; people who demonstrate each day their belief that it is possible to improve the lot of humanity as a whole.

Students, I think, are particularly susceptible to pessimism, as we are encouraged to think critically about each argument presented to us, to search out flaws. We become excellent cynics. It is for this reason (amongst many others) that this journal is so important, within the Atlantic region, certainly, but also as a sampling of the exciting new scholarship being created by undergraduate students everywhere. Hopefully, this years ATLIS journal will inspire and encourage further interest and innovation in the arena of international politics.

It has become a tiresome cliché to say that we live in a time of dramatic change, yet this sentiment should not be ignored simply because we hear it so frequently. We *do* live in a time of dramatic change. Whether you are morally for or against globalization, there can be little doubt that perceptions of space and time are collapsing thanks to technology such as the internet. This year, I have had friends go to Poland, China, Sweden, Argentina, and Kenya – a diverse range of countries and experiences. I can talk to them all at the same time, online (barring time change differences). To me, this is the epitome of globalization.

The diversification of the International Relations field reflects this broadening and deepening of our understanding of the world and the actors within it. Within this journal are pieces related to Gender Studies, History, to Political Science and to Geography. Each of these papers further draws on other disciplines, pulling strands of thought from the sciences, the social sciences, and personal experience to create a more encompassing, engaging, and realistically complex view of what is occurring in the world today. Gone are the black and white (or red and white?) discussions of Cold War politics. Certainly the theories that originated in that time still influence today's thought, but they are not longer central. Today we worry about the homogenization of culture, about gender inequality, about political economy – we focus not solely on state security, but on human security. We focus on what we have in common, rather than on our differences. Our focus has shifted to humanity. We focus on improving the lot of millions of people who were not lucky in their birthplace, and a large part of our willingness to engage in these acts of improvement have to do with the interchange of culture between North and South. With the broadening and deepening of our awareness, here in the North, of the disadvantages and daily struggles of those in the South, so too is the international relations discipline enlarged. Of course, we in the North can never understand these struggles at a personal level – but we have a willingness to engage in finding new means of problem solving, and we have the skills to sift through development precedents and come up with our own solutions. And while those solutions may not solve the problems as we hope, they are at the very least a step in a stumbling path that we can hope will only lead to good.

That hope, that optimism and belief in the existence of solutions, is the foundation of any scholarship in this discipline, and despite the critical analyses presented in the following pages, it sings through this journal, merely in the fact of its existence, as well as in each individual contributor's unique voice and experience. This year's ATLIS journal is diverse, with no unifying theme other than its very diversity.

Enjoy!