

WHY THE FULBRIGHT PROGRAM REALLY MATTERS

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ABSTRACT

The goals set forth in the *UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development* show that the pursuit of the right knowledge and action is no longer just a matter of human welfare. It has become a question of the survival of our civilization. This cannot be successfully addressed without comparative knowledge, intercultural understanding and last but not least, sufficient empathy and solidarity. This is why the Fulbright program, as the largest and most prestigious educational exchange program in the world, really matters.

Keywords: Sustainable development • intercultural understanding • educational exchange



The name Fulbright has two very positive connotations. First, it commemorates the highly esteemed U.S. Senator J. William Fulbright, and second, it designates the largest and most prestigious educational exchange program in the world. Fulbright's idea of giving Americans and citizens of other countries the opportunity to exchange knowledge, ideas, and cultural patterns still rightly bears his name and reminds us of the importance of an open and interconnected world. Today, after 75 years of the program's existence, we can much better understand and appreciate its far-reaching scope and benefits, and be grateful to Senator Fulbright and all the other legislators who supported his 1946 bill, the Fulbright Act. In the decades that have followed, the program has become a leading example of an intercultural approach to education and science.

In the words of the Senator himself, "(T)he essence of intercultural education is the acquisition of empathy - the ability to see the world as others see it, and to allow for the possibility that others may see something that we have failed to see, or may see it more accurately." All my life's experience and especially my academic teaching in the field of comparative law and legal cultures have shown me that learning from other social and cultural environments is more than necessary for an intellectual, scholar or scientist. Of course, it is beneficial for any individual. But it is of particular importance for individuals whose opinions and professional or scientific achievements are widely recognized, or who play a leading role in major social fields such as politics, law, economics, education, health, environment, industry, or military. In theory, it is clear to everyone that the same knowledge can be used very differently in

the hands of a violent dictator or in the hands of a true democrat. In practice however, the lack of awareness of this fact is striking even among many educated people, whose ambition, egoism, greed and other negative tendencies make them servants of unethical goals and deeds.

The individuals who participate in the Fulbright program are ambitious and their intellectual abilities are above average. Many of them have assumed or will assume important or leading positions in various public and private institutions, organizations, and associations. The number of Fulbrighters who, for example, have received significant and prestigious national or international awards (such as the Nobel Prize) or who have become heads of state or government is relatively high. This means that their impact on people around the globe is significant. Their contribution to intercultural and multidisciplinary activities in their countries and around the world is especially indispensable when we think of the most pressing challenges facing humanity, such as armed conflicts, poverty, hunger, lack of education, demographic explosion, discrimination, extreme inequality, lack of certain resources, pollution of the planet, climate change, and mass migration as addressed in the *UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (2015)*.

The world is in dire need of proper education and enlightened leaders, as well as highly experienced and ethical scholars, scientists, and other experts with cross-cultural experience and human empathy. It is no longer just a matter of human welfare. It has become a question of the survival of our civilization. This is why the Fulbright program really matters. It is the model for enhancing knowledge, understanding, and ethics among intellectual and scientific elites, with positive consequences for the whole world.

I have had ample opportunities to experience, study, and learn from different cultures and social environments. I have spent half of my life under a communist regime in the former Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia and the other half in the modern democracy of my native Slovenia. In addition, all of my travels abroad and encounters with people from other parts of the world during that time and later, including my Fulbright scholarship in the U.S. in 2008, broadened my insight into and understanding of the impact of different social environments.

Let me say a few words about my experience from multiethnic and multicultural Yugoslavia, which was a unique social experiment. Everyone might be able to learn from it. Despite its communist rule, it was more tolerant than the communist regimes in other Eastern European countries. We lived in a one-party state that constitutionally created a unique system of self-management at the state level starting in 1974. There was no free market and no rule of law in the modern sense of the word. Instead of private or state property, so-called “social property” was invented as the predominant legal category. This property belonged to all and to no one in particular. Private property was allowed, but most of the property was legally defined as social property, managed by various workers’ organizations of associated labor. There was

almost no unemployment. The social rights were quite extensive, and many state (public) funds were spent on the army or lost through non-transparent or corruptive operations of politically protected elites. All of this led to an ineffective economy and consequently, in combination with extreme nationalist tendencies in some Yugoslav federal republics, to war and the dissolution of the federal state.

My experiences in communist Yugoslavia and democratic Slovenia have given me a very deep insight into and understanding of manipulative political ideologies and practices. From the non-democratic and the democratic, both have their positive and negative sides. However, if we evaluate them from the point of view of human ethics and development, we must agree with Winston Churchill, who said that democracy is not the best system, but we do not know a better one.

My home country, Slovenia, gained its independence from Yugoslavia in 1991 and established itself constitutionally as a modern democracy governed by the rule of law. But all these constitutional changes were not followed by a sufficient democratic political and broader culture. The transition from an authoritarian regime to a democratic regime requires time, effort and a truly democratic political elite. Unfortunately, even today, after 30 years of living in a modern constitutional and parliamentary democracy, the political culture in Slovenia is not yet at a sufficient democratic level. Of course, there are many other countries and societies facing similar challenges.

This is just one example to show that changing social values, worldviews and ideologies is not an easy process. It takes a long time and continuous efforts on the part of the protagonists and supporters of democratic values to complete such a change. All of this was especially evident in the early days of the democratic transition in Slovenia. People were confused in many ways. Things that are obvious and undisputed today seemed very strange at the time. Political parties, for example, why did we need more than one? They would only bring conflict into the political arena. Nevertheless, such dilemmas were overcome, and people generally adapted to modern democracy. Among its protagonists were many Slovenian intellectuals who had previously studied in various democratic countries, including the USA.

I strongly believe that the Fulbright Program must continue its commitment to providing insights into ideological, cultural, and other differences and finding ways to reconcile them through understanding, tolerance, and multidisciplinary approaches. Despite setbacks in the program's current performance due to the Covid 19 pandemic, the program should continue to prioritize student and faculty exchanges. The

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use of internet platforms and applications and other technological means is useful and will continue to evolve, but they should never replace direct human to human contact. Therefore, student and faculty exchanges should remain the fundamental imperative of the program.

In conclusion, I would like to emphasize that the privilege and honor of participating in the Fulbright Program can only be justified by the noble intentions and actions of each individual Fulbrighter. The future of this world depends on individuals and groups who understand the urgent need for proper balance between our materialistic and spiritual dimensions and the need to strengthen our ethical efforts for sustainable development and protection of the dignity of all human beings and other beings. I am convinced that Fulbrighters are among those who are aware of these needs and necessities and who are willing and able to meet them with appropriate responses and solutions.

NOTES

1. United Nations. (2015) *General Assembly Resolution A/RES/70/1. Transforming Our World, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*. Available from: http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/RES/70/1&Lang=E.

BIOGRAPHY

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