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Author(s): David L. Paletz

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# ***The Wondering Scholar: A Personal Memoir***

*by David L. Paletz*

I have never met a Fulbright scholar who failed to discourse gleefully on the bountiful personal benefits of being abroad. Of course there is often no lack of complaints: inconveniences and isolation are bemoaned, adjustment difficulties adumbrated, financial burdens itemized; but these pale before the gains.

## ***Personal***

I am no exception. My personal life and values were affected in at least three ways by my Fulbright to Denmark: through individual incidents, encounters with a different set of character traits, and exposure to social attitudes in action. The key was comparison.

Individual incidents abounded. I briefly offer three to illustrate the personal joys of my life in Denmark. I remember my son embraced by his soccer teammates as he scored his first goal for them in what turned out to be a monumental victory. I recall my daughter (the child with the darkest hair) surrounded by her Danish friends at a birthday party for one of her classmates. And I treasure a copy of my wife's photograph in the local Odense newspaper illustrating a story about how winter was coming early that year and Danish women were taking expeditiously to their wooly lamb coats. My wife is an unlikely looking Dane.

Character traits were equally challenging. My family and I attended a dinner to celebrate the successful completion of the harvest. We sat with some two hundred Danes on either side of a long table. At the end of each course all plates were passed down to the end of the table. The only plates with any food left were from my family. We learned quickly; after the first course our plates were clean and empty too.

Danes do not waste food. Nor energy: the houses are smaller and better insulated than those in the United States. They taught me about the paramount importance of energy conservation, and how to achieve it. In the process, my children taught themselves how to ride bicycles just like their Danish schoolmates—no more chauffeuring for their parents.

Danes are less litigious than Americans. One day my wife accidentally hit a car. The other driver stopped immediately, assured himself that my wife

was uninjured, and departed. He repaired his own car. No police, no insurance claims, no litigation.

Character traits shade over into social attitudes. Even during the relatively brief period of the Fulbright award many of these attitudes could be understood and assessed. For example, Danes differ quite dramatically from Americans in their views about the importance of competition in daily life; they downplay it in schooling, business, even sports. They have a much more generous attitude about the role of the state in providing for the social welfare of its citizens: most are appalled at America's lack of a national health system. And they are far more willing (albeit with increasing reluctance) to pay for such social services.

No need, then, further to expound the personal benefits of being a Fulbright scholar. Clearly, living in a different country facilitates illuminating comparisons between assumptions and reality. It encourages self-examination. Self-examination is good for the soul. But the American scholar wondering whether to apply for a Fulbright rightly poses serious and sober questions that transcend personal pleasures. In what ways can a Fulbright award be of professional significance to a scholar whose research interest is the United States? How might it stimulate research? Could it possibly improve one's teaching?

### ***Professional Rewards***

The question of research is the easier of the two to answer. Again, comparison is the spur. But it is sustained by immobility. Shortly after my arrival in Denmark I participated in the founding of the Dansk Fulbright Selskab (an organization of Danes who had received Fulbrights). The evening was graced by Jerome Bruner's lecture on the delights of being a wandering scholar. Wandering has its place. And certainly I occasionally journeyed to conferences throughout Europe giving papers, discussing issues with scholars from all nations. But otherwise, I could be found in my house in the small farming village of Kertinge overlooking the end of a fjord. Wandering was brought to a halt by teaching obligations, the Fulbright program's lack of funds for intercountry travel, the price of gas, and the snow. Our visitors came by sled. I was told it was the worst winter in fifty years. But every year every Fulbrighter in Denmark is told the same: the argument is losing credibility.

Then there was the food, which increased my girth and dulled my wanderlust. "There will be no revolution in Denmark," wrote one of my students in her exam, "because all the Danes are hurrying home to get out of the rain and eat dinner." And the beer, the glorious beer, which reinforced the effects of the food. When the snow lay 'round, deep and crisp and uneven, the roads were impassable and impossible, not a human figure or mode of locomotion could be seen, the beer trucks sped through the streets and countryside on their merry ways.

Thus, I was not much of a wandering scholar. "Boredom is the enemy of scholarship," Professor Bruner had said. But boredom can be an inspiration for scholarship by eliminating all obstacles to thought and work. In this sense,

diversion is the real enemy of scholarship. Diversion by committee meetings, social activities, tennis (from December until May the few courts were snow covered). The lack of graspable diversions forces the scholar to put something down on that pristinely, obscenely white paper in the typewriter. In other words, to think.

### ***Reflection, Television, and Society***

So I became a wondering scholar. I had the time to explore and reflect upon, in Bruner's words, "the boundary between the natural and the conventional." Danish people, events, and institutions forced me to think and wonder about their American counterparts. And as a scholar who specializes in the relations between politics and the media, who reviews films, who is fascinated by the effects of technology on people's lives, my thoughts ineluctably turned to the television set, with its pictures in black and white, loaned to us by our good and generous friend, Ebba Pedersen. Why, I wondered, were I and my family watching less television than in the United States, and enjoying it more?

Most of what people know about government—its institutions and members, their activities, decisions, defects, strengths, capabilities—comes from the mass media in general and television in particular. The self-same media have the power to decide which issues will be brought before the public, the terms in which they will be presented, and who will participate, under what conditions, in the presentation. By dint of the subjects they cover and the way they structure them, the mass media tells Americans and Danes what to think about, how to think about it; sometimes, even what to think. By and through the mass media come the facts, arguments, and ideas with which most people make some sense or nonsense of their lives. Two million of the four million Danes over thirteen watch the 7:30 evening news.

My first encounter with Danish television was bemusing. Saturday night, prime time, when sponsors in America spend hundreds of thousands of dollars to buy a precious minute to show a commercial for laxatives or mouth washes or underarm deodorants. There were no commercials on Danish television. What did I see when I tuned in? A man adjusting a microphone, and adjusting, and adjusting it for two minutes. An American television executive would have had apoplexy.

That first impression was not misleading. Subsequently, we watched one show on prime time devoted exclusively to the potato. It had its effect: the next time we went out to dinner our Danish friends served potatoes cooked two different ways. Then there was the clock with a bird attached which ticked the time away whenever there was a period between programs. The only American expression for such television is "laid back."

A second difference: American television programs are at once more puritanical and yet more sexually enticing than those on Danish television (except for those imported from the States). Puritanical: limitations on obscene language, broadly defined, and on the amount of women's cleavage that can be exposed. Enticing: sexual innuendo and attraction are everywhere on American television; in the commercials, virtually irrespective of product,

and on the shows. And there is so much more American television: more channels, more programs, more time. One of my Danish students took a trip to New York and spent most of his time there watching old movies all through the night.

But then my reflections took me past the relatively obvious differences to the more intriguing issues of sexism (not sex) and violence. Their relative absence from Danish television is striking. How to explain it? Not by audience imperatives, as I discovered when my investigations took me to the research section of Danish Radio (as the state organization controlling broadcasting in Denmark is titled). Here I learned that around 50 percent of the Danish population is able to receive Swedish and German television programs; and that around half of them watch these shows each day. And what they watch are entertainment programs and sports. As for the Danes who are technologically confined to viewing their sole national channel, when asked what programs they want more of, they, too, sought entertainment: westerns, thrillers, dramas. In other words, in both the States and Denmark "people . . . just want to look at television and forget their troubles" (in the immortal words of National Broadcasting Company President Fred Silverman).

One may wonder about modern industrial societies (and other societies, too). Why are their members so alienated that they crave such mind-numbing, mildly titillating entertainment? The corollary question is: what is done about the craving? In the United States the financial incentive is determinative and entertainment predominates. Not quite so in Denmark. Danes may want more entertainment programs, but their desire is not entirely gratified. The reason: social policy, in part embodied in legislation.

The issue can be defined as freedom vs. control. Despite some political and economic and social restraints, American television is relatively free. Free to spend millions of dollars producing formula television programs of minimal significance. Free for its owners to gather as much profit as they can, "to coin money" as one media magnate once observed. Free to spread sexism and violence across the land. And free to make programs like "King" and "Roots" and "Holocaust" which, no matter how limited by need to appeal to the mass audience, are risky and brave ventures.

In contrast is the Danish system, consciously designed to educate, making far fewer concessions to commercial and entertainment considerations than its American counterpart, yet constrained by inadequate funding and periodic political pressures. It is a state-administered monopoly system, assertedly run in the public interest but controlled nonetheless. And who decides on the public interest? Is it in the public interest to criticize or praise the society, or both? Is it in the public interest to urge children to stand up for their "rights" against their parents, as one program did? Control is open to abuse.

### ***More Reflection***

Much more, as it transpired. During my Fulbright, the American television program "Holocaust" was shown in many countries throughout the world, including Denmark. The program was provocative, reactions were widespread in Europe and particularly in West Germany. Sadly, the producers and

distributors had made no efforts to undertake or even encourage the kind of comprehensive, comparative, international study of "Holocaust's" effects that the subject warranted. Nonetheless, individual researchers and research organizations did conduct their own effects studies. Because I was in Europe at the time, I was able to track down and collect much of this data. I then worked with Willem Langeveld of the University of Amsterdam, editor of the *International Journal of Political Education*, to produce the special (March 1981) issue of that prestigious journal devoted to some of the best and most thought provoking of the research on the effects of the television series.

Nor was that the limit of the professional work I was able to accomplish during my stay in Denmark. Free from the routines of daily life, time-consuming committee and other university administrative duties; happily without a telephone (and with a farmer landlord whose lack of English ensured that every message we received was gratifyingly, hopelessly inaccurate), I was at last able to synthesize my ideas on authority, political behavior, and the mass media into a coherent whole. Writing was never so easy (it was still hard, writing is never easy), as during those snowbound days when our only company consisted of the infrequently switched-on television set; the radio, which brought us the civilized overseas service of the BBC; fluttering pheasants; and a fox limping menacingly and sadly through the snow. Thus I wrote the first draft of my book *Media Power Politics*, the final version of which was published during the spring of 1981.

### **Teaching**

Fulbright awards bring personal pleasures; they fructify research interests, possibilities, and accomplishments. But what of teaching?

My initial impression was that the rewards of teaching about America to Danish students would be problematic. I would simply have to simplify my American material for less knowledgeable foreign students. But the problems turned out to be more complicated, the challenges more demanding, and the results far more gratifying than I anticipated.

My assignment was the first difficulty. I was asked to teach two different kinds of courses: my specialty and a general introduction to American society and government. The area of my expertise posed no problem; the students would be of graduate caliber. But how to convey the broad subject of the United States' society and government? What is the essence of America's culture? Of its economic system and social relations? Of its political institutions and processes? I had never been compelled to face these questions so graphically before, to identify and isolate America's dominant values and the determinants of Americans' behavior. For America is a contradictory country; its people cooperate, yet are competitive, are pragmatic yet idealistic, egalitarian yet elitist, materialistic yet spiritual. America is a nation of small hamlets and massive cities, of flagrant wealth and dire poverty, of racism and pluralism, of corruption and incorruptible integrity, of selfishness and self-abnegation.

I had to decide how to teach topics that were essentially alien to Danish students, such as constitutional law, judicial review, our elongated electoral process, political parties in transition, race relations, ethnic groups, single-

issue movements, and the principle of “self-interest rightly understood,” so brilliantly defined by de Tocqueville.

I was tempted to employ a textbook. But I rarely use textbooks in teaching: they homogenize complexity, denigrate the language, bore the best students. Such books could never communicate the diversity that is America to my Danish students. I found myself returning and returning to originals: philosophers and scholars who have tried to explain America to themselves and their readers. I asked my students to familiarize themselves with the U.S. Constitution; to read parts of *The Federalist Papers* and excerpts from de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*; to consider Turner's frontier thesis. I had them read a set of interviews with three quite different Americans whose one common denominator was that they operated motion picture theaters; one ran drive-ins, another art houses, the third was becoming wealthy by showing “nudie cutie” movies. And I gave them the latest issue of *Daedalus*, which was devoted to exploring various aspects of American life and politics in the 1980s.

I lectured occasionally but taught mainly through discussion. This was a risk. Danish students, I had been told, were unenthusiastic about attending class, did not talk much when they appeared, and were generally reticent and shy. My initial experience seemed to reinforce the stereotype. I arrived promptly at 11:00 a.m. at my first class to find the classroom empty. Only later was I informed that class sessions formally begin fifteen minutes after the bulletin listing. Subsequently, I found my students articulate, argumentative, and droll. The discussions were invariably lively. We sought to discern what our authors were trying to say, if it had made sense in the past and whether it still did. We asked whether the United States had changed over the years and, if so, why. We compared the United States with Denmark, with the Soviet Union, with the United Kingdom, and tried to explain the differences.

Teaching was not confined to formal class sessions. The American embassy supplied us with videotapes of “Meet The Press” and other television interview shows (sadly with the commercials deleted). Thus I was able to show the students, to their incredulity, how American politics could contain politicians so disparate in looks, in language, in demeanor, in conceptions of politics, as governor Jerry Brown of California and Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives “Tip” O'Neill.

We went to the movies, those artifacts of American culture which so influence foreign opinions of the States. We saw *Saturday Night Fever*, *The Deer Hunter*, *Girlfriends*, Jane Fonda in a western, Jerry Lewis in *The Nutty Professor*. And we discussed what we saw. But we did not depend solely upon the Odense theaters. My wife proposed a program of classic American films to be shown in 16mm on the campus, the first such innovation there. Her proposal was approved, modest funding for her and the films provided. The series was successful, attracting students during even the most horrendous weather. Among the films shown were *Citizen Kane*, *The Treasure of Sierra Madre*, *Little Caesar*, *Top Hat*, and the original *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*.

As part of the program, my wife prepared introductory lectures. More education for us both. Were the films representative of their genres? Of American society in general? What did they tell us about the United States



when they were made? About the aspirations, expectations, and hopes of the people? Fortunately the university's library contained a useful selection of the relevant literature; and the ever-helpful librarians expeditiously obtained whatever else we requested.

## **Conclusion**

In summary, I discovered that it is very useful to view one's society and its institutions from afar. It is illuminating and challenging to teach about one's country to students who have their distinctive, sometimes peculiar, view of it—or no view at all.

These, then, are the personal and professional rewards that variously accrue, usually in profusion, to Fulbright recipients. They are rewards that live in one's daily teaching and research, and in the memory. And when all else fails they have their political uses: it is always possible to silence colleagues at a department meeting with the phrase: "Well, when I was a Fulbright scholar. . . ."



*David Paletz is Professor of Political Science at Duke University, where he has taught since 1969. During 1978–79, he served as Fulbright Lecturer in Political Science at Odense University in Denmark. Professor Paletz has been a Congressional Fellow of the American Political Science Association, a Brookings Institution Guest Scholar, and the recipient of a Humanities Fellowship from the Rockefeller Foundation. In addition to his numerous articles, he is the author of two books, Politics in Public Service Advertising on Television (Praeger Special Studies, 1977), and Media Power Politics (The Free Press, 1981).*