

## **Publications**

### **Teaching Europe to Undergraduates**

**by Robert Henry Cox**

Over the past decade there has been a lot of discussion on the direction European studies should take in the post-communist era. Some universities are merging East and West European Studies programs. Faculty and graduate students are being encouraged to develop pan-European research projects. In my opinion, much of this discussion has continued to overlook the most important mission that we as scholars of Europe can and should fulfill: to make as many people as possible aware of, and enthusiastic about European affairs. This mission, of course, points directly to the important role of undergraduate education. While scholars devote their energies to finding more resources to conduct research workshops or hire graduate assistants, education--especially undergraduate education--rarely enters the picture.

This neglect of undergraduate education is not in our best self-interest. Especially for those of us who teach at publicly funded colleges and universities, students who graduate and go into positions in business and government are among the most important allies we have. Many of those students will have as much or more professional contact with Europe than those of us who make one or two trips a year to conduct research or deliver a paper at a conference. If they are well prepared they will be more successful and more likely to remember the role their faculty played in helping them build strong careers. Moreover, the state legislatures that decide our universities' appropriations are more likely to be staffed with our undergraduates than our graduate students. If our undergraduates become excited about Europe, we will find it easier to get the resources to fund our workshops and graduate students.

Teaching Europe to undergraduates poses a few vigorous challenges. I have developed three theses concerning these challenges which are the guiding principles of the European studies program at the University of Oklahoma, a program that has about 25 students, many of whom are among the university's best and brightest.

### **Europe is not pre-colonial America**

One of the biggest challenges is distinguishing education about Europe from all other things taught at American universities. For example, most universities have a requirement that students be well versed in western civilization. The literature of Goethe, the political thought of Marx, or Deleuze post-modernism are part of the western canon. But "Western Civ" classes often are taught by faculty who otherwise are not specialists of Europe. In the Western Civ tradition, great ideas transcend culture, geography and time, whereas the area studies tradition emphasizes the role of time, place and culture in shaping thoughts and actions. Teaching the uniqueness of Europe in this context demands that one go against the grain to emphasize difference rather than sameness between Europe and North America. Indeed, this challenge is unique to the teaching of Europe. Most other regions of the world are readily accepted as different, so students and faculty easily agree that they need to learn about the unique cultures that reside in those corners of the world. In the minds of students and faculty, Europe is taken to be pre-colonial America, and the fact that Europeans often have different outlooks, goals and desires can be confusing to American students.

### **Make Europe Relevant**

European Studies is unique among the area studies programs for the rigidity of its disciplinary boundaries. Scholars in Latin American Studies, for example, tend to agree that students should know about Mayan architecture as well as Pablo Neruda poetry to fully understand their region. In European Studies, by contrast, discussion across disciplinary boundaries is rare. In my experience, historians often make the mistake of thinking that questions about the past have intrinsic merit. Those historians who dare to ask how the past influences the present may risk being declared heretics, but their students will value their efforts to connect with the present. Language programs seem to be built around the premise that students study languages to take jobs as faculty in language departments. Students who merely want to read and speak the language will be brushed off as insincere. Drake University has taken a dramatic approach to this problem by abolishing on-campus language instruction in favor of study abroad. At many other universities a creative solution is to develop courses in “Business French” or “Legal Spanish.” Such classes are great ways to impart cultural understanding, and in ways that students are more likely to believe are helpful.

### **Make Europe Useful**

Today more than ever, students believe that their future career success is tied to the global economy. Consequently they are more inclined to build an international dimension into their education. Unfortunately they often overlook Europe, concentrating instead on more exotic parts of the world. China and the rest of Asia loom large in newspaper headlines. Especially in the Southwestern United States, students believe that NAFTA will make Mexico their first destination for business travel. But the reality is that in most parts of the United States, Europe has a bigger impact on the economy than any other region of the world. In many states, even in the Southwest, trade with Europe accounts for over half of total trade. Students who want to maximize their chances of international careers are better off learning about Europe. We need to remind them of that and muster the information necessary to convince them of it.

Lastly, a focus on public policy is helpful. Because Europeans live in relatively affluent democracies, their policy problems are strikingly similar to those in the United States. Yet, Europeans consistently develop different approaches to such problems: environmental degradation, road and rail infrastructure, and social welfare. Classes that compare policies need to develop problem solving skills by challenging students to ask what Americans can learn from Europeans and vice versa, rather than simply learning how Europeans and Americans are different. The old saw that Americans worship the market and Europeans are deferential to the state is not only outdated, it is unhelpful for developing critical and creative thinkers.