**Publications**

## Teaching "The Europe Course" in a Time of Crisis

**by Oriol Pi-Sunyer**

By January (2003) it was evident that significant changes would need to be made to Introduction to the Cultures of Europe, an undergraduate anthropology course I was slated to teach during the spring semester. Books had been ordered and the course package was ready for delivery. What I had not anticipated was the rapid escalation in transatlantic tensions and the accompanying shift to a much angrier — even vicious — rhetoric. The front page of the January 26 New York Times week in review section was dominated by the spectral figure of an American soldier outlined against a flaming night sky and the headline, “The Quarrel Over Iraq Gets Ugly”; three days later I would meet the class for the first time.

"The Europe course," as it is often called, is one that I have taught for a dozen years. Its content has always varied in response to developments in Europe; at an earlier juncture, we paid particular attention to the vicissitudes of post-Socialism. It does not attempt to be a case-by-case examination of the range of European cultures and societies — an impossible, and questionable, pedagogical task. The goal is more modest. My expectation is that by the time our work is over, students will have a reasonable comprehension of contemporary Europe, the world that has been put together in the aftermath of World War II and remains very much a work in progress. They should also have some awareness of the place of Europe in current anthropological thought, and why an “anthropology of Europe” is not an oxymoron.

An ancillary aim is to use anthropology’s mediating position to view our own society through a different prism. Europe, because of economic, institutional and cultural similarities with the United States — and, of course, significant differences — is a particularly good platform from which to consider American society. For students, such an exercise may assist in recognizing the force of the cultural assumptions they have grown up with, and which often go unexamined.

The course, whose normal enrollment hovers around forty, tends to attract two sets of clients: undergraduates who use it to satisfy general education and global studies requirements, and a smaller component, seldom more than a third of the class, who enroll as anthropology majors. As an integral part of the department’s European Studies Program it also functions as a gateway to other courses on Europe. But regardless of students’ specific motivations or future plans, only a handful of them arrive with more than a superficial knowledge of European issues. The underlying causes of this situation are several and complex, but beyond the scope of this essay. However, weakness in the educational system does influence the agenda, including the structure of the course, the composition of the readings, and the need for robust handouts.

Some four weeks into the semester, students should have attended a dozen lecture and discussion sessions designed to make Europe less nebulous and culturally strange, since it is often the bizarre and unrepresentative that is best remembered. This weaning from stereotypes is accompanied by an overview of Europe’s more recent past. Readings for this first month include chapters of Bernard Lewis’

Cultures in Conflict and Eric Wolf's Europe and the People Without History, a number of short pieces devoted to recent anthropological research in Europe, and articles from The New Statesman, The Economist, The New York Times and other periodicals. The segment is intended to help students make sense of such factors and processes as early state building, the role of religion as an "ethnic" identifier, prototypical cases of ethnic cleansing, the genesis of modern nationalism, and imperial cycles.

Somewhat later we discuss the Industrial Revolution and role of war in industrial societies, particularly the place of the two world wars in European memory. This overview would hardly satisfy a historian, but I have learned that it is impossible to teach about contemporary Europe without first imparting some broad temporal and spatial guidelines. It is also my practice to copy and distribute relevant newspaper articles, as they become available. These are incorporated into class handouts, 18 of which were passed out over the course of the semester in question.

This is the normal pattern, but soon we began to pay increasing attention to the coming war. The February 24 handout begins with the following statement, "I thought it would be exceeding odd to be teaching a class on Europe and, somehow, not discuss with you the issue that is in the forefront of our minds: what is generally termed 'the war', already often in the present tense." This initiated a cluster of lectures and related readings dealing with Europe, America, and the war. I went on to stress that I raised these matters with care, not because there should be any doubt respecting their importance, or about the legitimacy of classroom discussion, but because I was conscious of the responsibility vested in me as a teacher. I explained that, in my opinion, it was particularly in times of crisis that we should be prepared to tackle difficult issues, even matters we might disagree on. After all, was it not at the heart of liberal education to be informed, to debate and discuss? In an educational environment that has been stressing skills over knowledge, this might have sounded a touch naïve.

That day the handout (which I had cobbled together over the weekend) was titled "The Rift(s)." It ran to four single-spaced, referenced, pages, not counting a New Yorker cartoon and a New York Times Op-Ed piece by Régis Debray with the prophetic line, "provoking chaos in the name of order, and resentment instead of gratitude, is something to which all empires are accustomed." This and other handouts, plus several of the readings, facilitated a reasonably sophisticated discussion of the relationship between political power and public opinion, the role of the media (especially television) in engineering consent, the serious rifts within Europe, and the catalogue of divisions —both substantive and stylistic— separating the United States and many European societies. There was obviously a great deal to talk about, and we would be doing so on and off for the rest of the semester.

I was also clear about my own position. I explained that as someone born in Europe who had experienced war as a child and an adolescent, war itself was neither alien nor distant. In my case this had not made me a pacifist, but rather someone who conceived of peace as a value in its own right, not simply one more foreign policy option. Furthermore, I pointed out that in America armed conflicts have tended to be conceptualized as occurrences that take place in distant lands. This has not been the case in Europe. We also discussed the trauma of September 11, an atrocity that visited a particular kind of violence on the citizens of New York and on the country as a whole.

I commented how in the days following the tragedy I had received telephone calls and email messages from friends and family in Europe. This solidarity was typical and heartfelt and represented an incalculable fund of good will that our leaders ought not to dissipate. As for the present, my hope was that the weapons inspectors, as they had requested, be allowed to continue their task, while American policies should be guided by a proper concern for the opinions of long-time friends and allies. Only the Security Council, I believed, could bestow legitimacy on intervention, while unilateral action was likely to be a dangerous and isolating course, even for a superpower.

It was vital, I thought, to help students achieve some understanding of European policies (varied enough, it is true), and the depth of public sentiments. I noted and questioned several of the currently widespread assumptions, including those of a Europe plagued by rampant anti-Americanism and anti-Semitism. In my experience, most Europeans were perfectly capable of differentiating between the people of the United States and a given American government. As for anti-Semitism, the handout that day quoted the words of Mortimer Zuckerman, “Europe is sick again. The memory of six million murdered Jews, it seems, is no longer inoculation against the virus of anti-Semitism.” To Europeans, I explained, the venom of such commentators was painful and surprising. In the majority of cases, the real question was not some purported resurgence of European anti-Semitism (most of my students knew little of present-day European Jewry), but rather profound differences of policy and opinion respecting Israel, Palestine, and the Middle East; all geographically very close to Europe.

In short, I tried to provide text and context to complex issues. The approach is built into the course. As much as possible, I endeavored to give a human face to what otherwise might seem distant and abstract concerns, matters such as immigration, demography, and globalization. Like Herman Lobovics (2003) in an earlier number of this newsletter, I used the case of the French rural activist José Bové to discuss a range of problems, national and international, and particularly the increasingly precarious position of Europe’s family farmers. On the war and related matters, I used a similar strategy. For example, later in the semester I explained why my sister (who had received a degree from an American college) joined more than a million other anti-war demonstrators on the streets of Barcelona.

What was the response to this foregrounding of the war in a course that many students probably assumed would be devoted to an examination of "traditional Europe"? My impression is that it went well, and certainly everyone was civil and considerate. The University of Massachusetts is a public institution, and today this translates into a student body that, in large part, is working class and grossly indebted. Quite a few of my students had links to the military: ROTC, National Guard, or Reserve. Obviously, the possibility of war was seen as consequential. Neither in class nor in the anonymous course evaluations did anyone express discontent or discomfort at our discussion of the problems that war might bring. Several students went out of their way to thank me for providing a space for discussion.

For my part, I learned that anything of consequence can be brought up, but that this has to be done in such a manner that others’ opinions are respected. We had disagreements, but no fights. Quite possibly, times of real crisis offer special opportunities for serious teaching and serious debate. I certainly never

felt under pressure to conform to a particular "patriotic" stance, and I don't believe anyone else felt under duress.

**Reference**

Lebovics, Herman. 2003. Explaining the New Europe. European Studies Newsletter 32: (5/6):9, 12-13.