

Internationalization as a Cause of Nationalization in American Scholarship: The Paradoxes of Academic Travel in the Nineteenth Century*

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Each year, thousands of American students travel abroad to study in colleges and universities around the world. The New York-based Council on International Educational Exchange identifies hundreds of programs in locations ranging from Austria to Zambia, and many colleges run programs of their own. But what do these programs actually teach, and what do students really learn while they are overseas? In February, 2002, a satirical newspaper, *The Onion*, captured the reputation of many of these programs in a front-page headline: «Semester Abroad Spent Drinking With Other American Students.» The spoof went on to profile «Jon Blevins, an Indiana University junior studying in Seville,» noting his deliberate avoidance of the Spanish language, his habit of socializing exclusively with fellow Americans, and his general obliviousness to the vibrant Andalusian culture around him. The story ended with a quotation: «Sure it's weird taking classes from someone who barely speaks English,» Blevins quips. «But I've had some really unique experiences. I'll never forget it» (*The Onion* 2002, p. 11).

The humor of this article stems at least partly from the notion that, historically—or, perhaps, ideally—study-abroad programs have encouraged American students to learn more about *other* cultures, to express themselves in *different* languages, and to embrace a *foreign* perspective on the world (at least temporarily). Yet, as historian Carl Diehl has observed in his book, *Americans and German Scholarship, 1770–1870* (1978), American students' unwillingness—or perhaps their inability—to learn about their host countries has a long history. Diehl describes whole «colonies» of Americans at the University of Berlin and the University of Göttingen in the 1840s, 1850s, and 1860s and argues that, with so many compatriots enrolled at these institutions, it was impossible for Americans to immerse themselves in German academic culture. Unable to detach themselves from their American point of view, they could never quite see the German university through *German* eyes. In Diehl's words, «The anxieties which the first generation of Americans experienced in the German universities completely prevented their learning what they had ostensibly set out to learn. ... No matter how much they understood or admired the German scholars or the authentic knowledge which the German scholarship gained, the Americans could not accept or assimilate this kind of scholarship or academic system» (Diehl 1978, p. 149).

By way of illustration, Diehl highlights the travel experiences of William Dwight Whitney, a Williams College graduate who arrived in Germany in the summer of 1850. A serious student, Whitney matriculated at the University of Berlin to study philology—the historical and comparative analysis of languages both ancient and modern. Eager to begin his studies with such famous scholars as Franz Bopp and Albrecht Weber, Whitney often lamented «the number of American acquaintances I have in the city. We must of course be very social and friendly with one another ... and we go sightseeing with one another and take tea at one another's rooms so often that all the time that one can possibly spare for such things is quite used up and none is left to cultivate German acquaintances. The consequence is that I have hardly heard a word of German since I came to the country» (*ibid.* p. 129f.). What was most

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notable about Whitney, however, was that, before long, he *did* cultivate German acquaintances, and he *did* assimilate German scholarship, even as he retained an acute sense of his own American identity. Indeed, somewhat strangely, Whitney insisted that his identity as an American remained fundamentally unchanged (even unchangeable) throughout his studies abroad—studies that were specifically devoted to his immersion in «foreign» languages and civilizations.

The experiences of Whitney and others who studied abroad in the mid-nineteenth century raise key questions about the purposes of international academic exchange—not only in the nineteenth century, but in general. For example, why was scholarly interaction between «American» and «German» scholars so often framed in explicitly *national* terms (an essentialist framework repeated in the very phrasing of this question and also in the reference to «American scholarship» in the title of this paper) rather than *international* or *transnational* terms? Why was it so important for Whitney and others of his generation to identify themselves as «American» scholars while they were overseas, and why were they so eager to ascribe explicitly national significance to their scholarship when they returned home? And, perhaps most puzzling of all, why have the twentieth-century historians who have studied Americans' academic experiences abroad tended to suggest that genuine or authentic cross-national understanding was unlikely (perhaps impossible) in nineteenth-century scholarly exchange? A close look at the experiences of William Dwight Whitney and other academic travelers reveals a group of scholars pre-occupied with their identity as Americans but nonetheless defensive about their ability as scholars (and, in Whitney's case, scholars of language) to see the world from *other* points of view, to adopt *different* cultural perspectives, and yet constantly to remind themselves that the ideas and cultures they were studying were essentially foreign to their own. My research explores the ways in which Whitney and his generation pursued international scholarly training but came to see nationality as an inescapable part of every scholar's work.

For several decades, historians of higher education in the United States have tried to explain what Americans who studied in German universities in the nineteenth century actually learned overseas—or whether they really learned what their German mentors were trying to teach. While references to the «German influence» on the development of the American research university are ubiquitous in the historiography, a closer look at the literature reveals a surprising amount of skepticism about the degree to which American students truly *understood* the deeper meanings or implications of the German scholarship to which they were exposed. More often than not, historians have suggested that young American students absorbed only that which was compatible with an *American* national context; all else passed them by. Drawing severe—and, in many cases, unbridgeable—distinctions between «German» and «American» academic values, historians have tended to stress a process of national adjustment—usually cast as a *modification* but sometimes presented as a *distortion*—whereby «German» ideas had to be changed into «American» ideas in order to survive the long voyage across the Atlantic.¹

¹ One significant problem with the characterization of the «German» university in this period (and the reason the word German appears in quotation marks here) derives from the fact that «Germany» did not exist as a unified nation-state until 1871. The very idea of a «German» university was «under construction» in this period (indeed, twentieth-century historians' near-universal adoption of this designation reflects the phenomenal success of the German nationalist project in this period.) It would be far more accurate to use more specific designations such as «Prussian» to refer to the University of Berlin or «Hanoverian» to refer to the University of Göttingen. In the latter case, however, such a designation would complicate the cultural and political

Judging from this historiographical tradition, one would have to conclude, first, that «ideas have nations»; second, that academic culture inevitably reflects the national culture around it; and, third, that the history of the modern research university—in both Europe and America—is inescapably a history of national loyalty and national service. In contrast to the characterization of modern universities as politically impartial, culturally disinterested, or intellectually cosmopolitan, the image that emerges in the historiography is one of an institution with an intrinsically national orientation, national aim, or national purpose. Virtually every history of American higher education in the nineteenth century begins with the role of international scholarly exchange and ends with the consolidation of a uniquely «American» scholarly identity. Of course, as the story goes, the «American» university served only the most liberal, democratic, and enlightened interests (in contrast with the German, British, or French universities, depending on the period under review). Thus, ostensibly «German» concepts such as *Lehrfreiheit* and *Lernfreiheit* (the freedom to teach and the freedom to learn) are construed as innately compatible with the intellectual principles of the American Revolution—and, hence, were never exclusively or inherently «German» in the first place.

What makes this historiographical tradition ironic is the fact that its conflation of the American research university with a liberal democratic scholarly ideal echoes a nearly identical conflation that pervaded the German research university that Americans visited in the first half of the nineteenth century—the very universities that many historians have claimed American students did not (or could not) understand. Observing the various ways in which German universities advanced Romantic claims of transcendental knowledge in the early nineteenth century, historians have been quick to label such claims nationalistic; yet, seldom has the same critique been applied to American scholars who made identical claims in the same era. For example, when Thomas Jefferson established the University of Virginia in 1825 and combined an emphasis on «academic freedom» with an emphasis on «national service,» his rhetoric was identical to the rhetoric of his German counterparts in the same period (many of whom saw Jefferson himself as the quintessential model of republican leadership). Yet, when Jefferson recruited a faculty of «foreigners» to staff his new institution (against the advice of his colleague John Adams, who believed Europeans would corrupt American youth), students at the university rioted in opposition to a corps of «outsiders» whose interests they saw as different from their own. (Ironically, several of these students themselves later studied abroad.) Why such tensions between nationalism and internationalism in early nineteenth-century American higher education?

The topic of nationalism has, of course, attracted a great deal of scholarly work in the past several decades. Historians have shed a great deal of light on the specific ways in which nationalist ideologies took shape within the context of the expanding commercial and political interactions of the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries and grew increasingly more virulent in the imperialist context of the nineteenth century. Benedict Anderson, in his book, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism* (1983), showed how individuals and institutions transmitted new techniques of national-identity formation to different groups around the world—either intentionally or unintentionally—and, citing the work of Hugh Seton-Watson and Eric Hobsbawm, he acknowledged the role that institutions of education played in this process: «The progress of schools and universities measures that of nationalism,» he quoted, «just as schools and especially universities became its most

framework of analysis, because, throughout the period discussed in this paper, the Elector of Hanover was the British monarch (from George II to George III, George IV, William IV, and Victoria).

conscious champions.»² In a footnote, however, Anderson added—without explication—that «Academic institutions were insignificant to the American nationalism» (Anderson 1983, p. 71).³

How could universities be the «conscious champions» of nationalism everywhere else in the world, but not in America? Such an argument is startling, but, actually, it is not uncommon. The idea of a non-nationalist American academy pervades the historiography on higher education in the United States, not only as it pertains to the development of the American university in the nineteenth century, but also as it describes the continuation of that development in the twentieth century.⁴ Casting the American university as «national» but not «nationalistic,» historians have tried to explain why scholarly ideas so crucial to the rise of imperialistic and anti-democratic ideologies in European research universities (supposedly) did not lead to the same outcomes in the United States. In the process, most of these historians have reached the conclusion that Americans who studied in Germany not only failed to accept but also failed to comprehend the nationalist implications of the scholarship they encountered. Eager to deny that American scholars learned nationalism abroad, historians have widely held that Americans in Germany in the nineteenth century wore intellectual blinders or ideological earplugs that protected them from «illiberal» or otherwise «un-American» ideas while they were enrolled at Berlin, Göttingen, Tübingen, Heidelberg, Leipzig, Bonn, Halle, or any number of other German universities.

Educators who think that study abroad should make students aware of the deeper fabric of other cultures may well be troubled by such an interpretation, which at the very least casts doubt on the possibility of genuinely cross-national understanding. Instead of stressing the possibility of mutual coherence (if not necessarily compatibility) between German and American ideas, most historians have suggested a profound epistemological divide between «German» ideas on the one hand and «American» ideas on the other. The notion of a national dichotomy appears, for example, in the title of Charles F. Thwing's early book, *The American and the German University: One Hundred Years of History* (1928). More than his successors, Thwing gave the Americans credit for comprehending «Teutonic» culture, but, he noted, «What was desired and attempted, and also what was achieved, was the adoption of those elements of the German university which were, and are, worthiest, and which were adapted to the scholastic and other conditions of the new world.» As he explained, Americans «tasted, without drinking deep, of the waters of the Teutonic fount.» In this way, Thwing contended, impressionable Americans avoided the «over-intellectualism,» the «undue specialization,» and the national «chauvinism» of the German universities. Elsewhere in his book, however, Thwing held that what Americans learned *above all* in German universities was the spirit «of devotion to scholarly duty, of confidence in the truth, of bravery before dire perils, of love for the «Fatherland» unto the price of uttermost sacrifice» (Thwing 1928, p109, p159, p45).⁵ What they learned, in other words, was nationalism (and it was not difficult to hear the echoes of World War I in Thwing's interpretation).

Thwing filled his text with grandiose comparisons of German, American, French, and British national «character.» «The French, as a people, are aesthetic and artistic,» he wrote. «The Americans are not.

² Hobsbawm 1964, p. 166, quoted in Anderson 1983, p. 71. See also Hobsbawm 1990; Seton-Watson 1977; Wallerstein 1974; Gellner 1983; Bhabha 1990; Shell 1993.

³ For similar interpretations of American exceptionalism, see Greenfeld 1992; Rossiter 1971; Wilkinson 1988. For a critique of this exceptionalism, see the essays in Bender 2002 and Potter 1973.

⁴ The historical and other scholarly literature on the rise of nationalism in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries is vast. For more information on this subject as it applies to the United States, see, for example, Commager 1975; Zelinsky 1988; Kramer 1998; Kohn 1957; Waldstreicher 1997.

⁵ See also Thwing 1897; Paulsen 1895; Hart 1874.

The Germans are not. ... American students, therefore, turned away from a nation thus gifted and turned toward the universities of a nation more akin to their own likings and lacks» (ibid. p69). For Thwing, the appeal of German universities lay chiefly in what he considered to be their scientific and «practical» bent (as opposed to the supposedly more «literary» bent of French and British universities), and this view had a lasting effect. The image of the German university as an institution dedicated, in the early nineteenth century, to «applied research» dominated the historiography for decades. For example, two years after Thwing issued his book, Abraham Flexner issued *Universities: American, English, German* (1930), which noted that German universities outpaced their American counterparts in practical research to meet national needs, particularly in fields such as medicine and the hard sciences: «Long ago Germany learned that industry needs universities, not merely because the universities train chemists and physicists for their research laboratories, but because universities train intelligence, capable of being applied in any field whatsoever. That lesson the American university has yet to master» (Flexner 1930/1967, p165). Such a statement was somewhat surprising, given the disclaimer with which Flexner had opened his book—a disclaimer questioning the usefulness of national comparisons: «Every age, every country, has its unique concrete needs and purposes,» Flexner observed. «For that reason, there can be no uniform university type, persisting through the ages, transferable from one country to another» (ibid. p50).⁶

In the 1940s and 1950s, the issue of «what Americans really learned» in German universities in the nineteenth century underwent a dramatic revision. After World War II, the notion that American students had failed to «assimilate» German ideas or institutions came to be seen as an asset rather than a liability. A focus on practical or applied research remained, but it acquired an Anglo-Saxon cultural dimension as well as a more utilitarian philosophical base. In other words, the «American» university was cast as more «British» than «German.» As Richard Hofstadter and Walter Metzger noted in their landmark book, *The Development of Academic Freedom in the United States* (1955), «America took from German sources only that which fitted her needs, only that which was in harmony with her history» (Hofstadter/Metzger 1955, p367).⁷ For Hofstadter and Metzger, it was important to note that Americans who studied in Germany in the nineteenth century had not *become* «German.» They had not adopted or accepted «German» values. Indeed, as true-blooded Americans, they had not even been able to *understand* ideas or institutions that were «unneeded» in American or were «inharmonious» with American culture, politics, or thought. Instead, according to Hofstadter and Metzger, Americans who studied in German universities automatically—and unconsciously—translated their «foreign» experiences into an essentially American liberal democratic vernacular.

This process of «translation» was both figurative and literal, as historian Richard Storr attempted to show two years earlier in his monograph, *The Beginnings of Graduate Education in America* (1953). Describing the efforts of German-born philologist Charles Beck to create a German-style research seminar (or «seminary») at Harvard in the 1830s, Storr noted that Americans were unable to understand the connections that Beck hoped to make between philology, philosophy, and general «humanistic» education. As Storr wrote, «In the German universities from which Beck derived his ideas, philosophy was closely allied to philology, and the study of both was regarded as essential to the training of teachers. To Beck who had firsthand knowledge, the German system presumably made the

⁶ Given his disclaimer concerning the non-transferability of national university «types,» one wonders why Flexner believed Americans should even *try* to master «German» concepts of applied research.

⁷ See also Hofstadter/Hardy 1952 and Brubacher/Rudy 1958.

sense that familiar customs do; to native[-born] Americans, possessed of no profound understanding of foreign institutions, they might well have been confusing. The fact that Harvard usage varied suggests that German terminology had yet to be naturalized. Until it was, the effort to reform American institutions after the German pattern would have its semantic pitfalls.» Storr did not say whether Beck's «firsthand knowledge» derived from the fact that he was trained in a German university or from the fact that he was German by nationality. If training in a German university offered the necessary knowledge, then presumably Beck's German-trained colleagues at Harvard, including fellow philologist George Ticknor, could have grasped his «foreign» ideas, but if Beck's ideas made sense only to «native-born» Germans, then presumably *any* attempts to reform Harvard «after the German pattern» would be doomed from the start (Storr 1953, p165).⁸

Throughout his examination of the beginnings of graduate education in the United States, Storr emphasized the quest for a distinctly *American* institution of advanced study. In his view, Americans' desire for such an institution grew as more and more Americans studied in Germany. As he put it, «reliance upon Europe became hateful as the absolute number of Americans attending foreign institutions increased. Patriotism demanded an American university without denying the undoubted academic preeminence of European universities. Their excellence was a challenge and an inspiration. ... The urgency of this situation produced the atmosphere in which the first traditions of graduate education [in America] emerged» (ibid., p130). Characterizations of «international educational competition» have been repeated time and again in the historiography on the rise of American universities—both in the nineteenth century and in the twentieth—but Storr's rests on a strange pair of contentions: first, that American students both admired and hated foreign institutions and, second, that they sought to detach themselves from these institutions at the very moment when they were most drawn to them. These two contentions beg the question: What did Americans hope to learn abroad that they could not learn at home, and what did they aim to do with the «foreign» ideas they acquired once they returned to the United States (after all, it would seem from Beck's experience that «foreign» ideas had to be «naturalized» in order to be understood)?

Despite Storr's statement that «Patriotism demanded an American university,» he maintained (like Flexner) that there was no single definition of an «American» university. In Storr's words, «No single philosophy of education determined American thinking, nor did any single purpose give form to graduate study» (ibid., p131). Whereas German universities were basically all the same, he insisted, American universities had no rigid or uniform national characteristics. This image of a more diverse, amorphous, localized, or flexible American university was popular in the 1960s. For example, Frederick Rudolph argued in his book, *The American College and University: A History* (1962) that, even as «the research ideal» gained strength, Americans simply «would not give any one answer to the question: What is an American university? For, as in its people, its geography, its churches, its economic institutions, the United States in its universities was to reveal a remarkable diversity, an unwillingness to be categorized, a variety that would encompass differences in wealth, leadership, public influence, regional needs» (Rudolph 1962, p331f.). Yet, even as he eschewed the idea of one «American» university, Rudolph still proceeded to assign this institution one overriding national purpose. He paraphrased approvingly the words of Lyman Abbott, for example, who wrote in 1906 that the «way

⁸ For an interpretation of German influences in American culture in the eighteenth and nineteenth century—published in the same period as Storr's work but extending beyond the bounds of the university—see Pochmann 1957.

to understand the American university was to contrast it with its English and German prototypes. The English university, he concluded, revolved around culture, the production of gentleman aristocrats. The German university found its life not so much in culture as such but in scholarship, in erudition, in the production of scholars. The American university, the symbol of which [was, at the time,] located in the new University of Chicago, he saw as a place where the emphasis was placed neither on culture nor on scholarship but on service—on the preparation of young Americans for active lives of service» (ibid., p356).⁹

Unable to resist the temptation to give the American university a distinct national purpose, Rudolph concluded that the American university represented a «reconciliation» between «the English and the German, between the humanistic and the scientific» (ibid., p453). For Rudolph, the heart of this reconciliation was the idea of national service. And yet, by the early 1960s, an increasing number of historians were beginning to challenge the use of superficial national characterizations in describing the development of higher education in Europe and America. They noted, for example, that the German universities were not committed solely to scientific scholarship (in the sense of emphasizing practical results), nor were English universities innately hostile to empirical research. These more nuanced views of European models were certainly helpful, but they did not lead to the conclusion that Americans who studied abroad actually *understood* the institutions they encountered. Indeed, historians in the mid-1960s continued to emphasize a theme of intellectual and cultural inscrutability in their descriptions of American students overseas. For example, Laurence R. Veysey, in his widely read book, *The Emergence of the American University* (1965), conveyed throughout his text the failure of American students to comprehend the essence of German scholarly ideals or scholarly practice. As Veysey wrote, «During the final quarter of the nineteenth century, few academic Americans who embraced the ideal of scientific research failed to acknowledge an intellectual debt to an explicitly German style of educational experience. For this reason, it is important to point out certain of the discrepancies that existed between actual developments within the German universities and the manner in which Americans believed they were being influenced by Germany» (Veysey 1965, p126).

Taking direct aim at the characterization of the German universities as institutions dedicated to applied research, Veysey stated unequivocally that «The German university of the mid-nineteenth century did not reflect anything like an uncompromising spirit of positive science.» Instead, Veysey emphasized, the German university placed a premium on fields such as philology, philosophy, history, and political economy—fields that lent themselves to techniques of humanistic textual analysis and idealist (primarily Hegelian) philosophical examination. As Veysey wrote, «Aspiring Americans who visited Germany and returned with the phrase «scientific research» on their lips compounded this phrase from elements of German theory and practice which had very different contexts in their original habitat. The German ideal of ‘pure learning’ [either in the form of *Wissenschaft* or in the form of *Bildung*], largely unaffected by utilitarian demands, became, for many Americans, the notion of «pure science,» with methodological connotations which the conception had often lacked in Germany» (ibid.,

⁹ Rudolph was somewhat ambivalent about the accuracy of Abbott’s characterization of the American university, but he continued to believe in the relevance of national differences. «Conceivably,» he wrote, «Abbott was not defining the American university so much as he was delineating characteristic differences among various national cultures, and it may well be that the time when he wrote had more to do with his discovery of the service ideal [in the Progressive Era generally] than [it had to do with] any intrinsic outlook of the American university.»

p127). Veysey's more accurate re-characterization of the German university as an institution devoted to humanistic studies was valuable, but it did not suggest that Americans who had enrolled in German universities understood the meaning or significance of humanistic studies in *German* terms.

According to Veysey, both the American students *and* the historians who tried to write about them had misunderstood the essence of humanistic scholarship in Germany in the early nineteenth century. The cause of this misunderstanding, he argued, was the fact that German concepts such as *Bildung* and *Wissenschaft* quite literally made no sense in an American setting.¹⁰ The same year Veysey published his book, historian Jurgen Herbst probed the implications of this idea in his superb book, *The German Historical School in American Scholarship: A Study in the Transfer of Culture* (1965). More enthusiastic than Veysey about Americans' ability to understand German theories in the fields of history, philosophy, theology, sociology, and political economy, Herbst nonetheless argued that German theories did not translate easily into American educational practice. «When the ideas proved difficult to assimilate to American conditions, the scholars sought to modify or discard them, only to realize that their scholarly equipment, torn from its ideological setting, would no longer serve until a new context of ideas could be developed» (Herbst 1965, p232). Herbst, like his predecessors, held that different ideas suited different national contexts and could not survive outside their «original habitat.» Implicit in this view was the notion that ideas *do*, in fact, have nations—in the sense that ideas cannot transcend their national origins, at least not in the same form.

In Herbst's view, Americans perhaps learned what their German mentors taught, but they could not transfer these lessons to a new national context *intact*. In a chapter on «The Science of History and Politics,» Herbst asks rhetorically, «What, after all, was this German historical *Wissenschaft* [ordinarily translated as «science,» but, more accurately, «knowledge craft, AN] that promised so much to its American devotees?» Herbst's answer is intriguing, not because it strips *Wissenschaft* of any German origins but because it simply assigns *different* national origins to this idea. «Insofar as it was scientific, it was not much more than training in the methods of empirical research and inductive generalization. As such, it was not peculiarly German but was known in England and France as well» (ibid., p124). According to Herbst, what made *Wissenschaft* «German» was not its analytical methods but, rather, its application to German (and, specifically, Prussian) statecraft. In his words, the idea of *Wissenschaft* «derived its particular German aura from the success of the mid-nineteenth century German universities in making historical scholarship into a specialized profession»—a profession «caught up in the drama of Prussia's rise to power in Central Europe» (ibid., p124f.). In other words, the scholarship that Americans encountered in Germany was nationalistic not in its analytical *method* but, rather, in its political *application*. Moreover, at least according to Herbst, it was this application of humanist scholarship to nationalist ends that most fascinated Americans who studied in German universities.

Herbst noted the ways in which American historian George Bancroft—and, later, Herbert Baxter Adams and John Burgess—embraced the idea of historical scholarship as a tool of national-identity formation. Yet, at the same time, Herbst was ambivalent about the extent to which Americans really could (or should) assimilate «German» nationalist ideologies. This ambivalence led to an intriguing conclusion regarding Americans' ability to understand their German mentors' work. «Had they really grasped the *Ideengeschichte* of Humboldt and Ranke,» Herbst wrote, «they would have realized that

¹⁰ See Bruford 1975. For a different view of intellectual exchange based on medical education—published in the same period as Veysey's work but focused on a later historical era—see Bonner 1963.

not only the facts but the ideas of American history had to come from American sources. When they mixed American facts with German ideas, they could not but founder upon the shoals of cultural diversity» (ibid., p128). Yet, Herbst's view of Americans' studies abroad seemed at odds with itself. On the one hand, it implied that Americans did not understand their German mentors. On the other hand, it implied that, if they *had* understood their German mentors, they would have stayed home and would not have studied abroad in the first place (since all that was worth knowing—or, indeed, all that was even knowable—«had to come from American sources»). If American students had simply stayed home and had not exposed themselves to the works of Humboldt or Ranke, however, then obviously they could not have «really grasped» the ideas of these German scholars.

Such an interpretation may be perplexing, but it is not unique in the historiography on Americans' study abroad in the mid-nineteenth century. The theme of unfathomable—or culturally incomprehensible or at least nationally incompatible—ideas also guided the work of the aforementioned Carl Diehl, whose often-cited book, *Americans and German Scholarship, 1770–1870* (1978), explored the ways in which various American students, including William Dwight Whitney, tried—and, according to Diehl, failed—to grasp the neo-humanistic (or *Neuhumanistische*) principles behind German scholarship, especially in the field of philology. For Diehl, «the study of the experiences of American students in German universities provides an example of near-perfect discontinuity. Except for the smallest handful among them, these Americans did not have any inkling of the kind of scholarship that awaited them» (Diehl 1978, p3). According to Diehl, Americans who *did* recognize the nationalistic aims of German philological research in the nineteenth century consciously rejected this work. In his words, «Americans, far from assimilating German scholarship, experienced grave doubts and anxieties about it.» He added that «the first generation of Americans to study in German universities seems not to have absorbed very much of German learning» (ibid., p149).

Diehl's emphasis fell squarely on Americans' inability to comprehend the ideas they encountered in the German universities. «Approaching their German studies with a doggedly practical spirit,» he observed, «the Americans remained essentially closed to the original humanistic purposes of the German philology» (ibid., p150). It may be, however, that Diehl missed the deeper implications of his own interpretation—particularly its insight into the aims of German philological studies in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. As Diehl noted, the heart of *neuhumanistische* scholarship in this period was the detailed examination of ancient texts. German philologists who interpreted ancient texts claimed the ability to immerse themselves in the cultures that had given rise to these texts and, in the process, to understand the essential qualities of distant civilizations. As Diehl noted, neo-humanist philologists claimed «to enter the «spirit» of that culture, to understand its particular cultural forms, its characteristic «genius,» and its individual contribution to the development of humanity» (ibid., p12).¹¹ Such claims were significant, because, if philologists could, in fact, «enter the «spirit»» of other cultures through scholarly effort, then it would seem plausible for American scholars to «enter the «spirit»» of *German* academic research and understand *its* «cultural forms,» *its* «characteristic «genius»» and *its* «contribution to the development of humanity.» In other words, it would seem that the techniques of cross-cultural understanding that guided neo-humanist research in the early nineteenth century could just as well have facilitated cross-cultural understanding among American students who were learning these techniques in Germany.

¹¹ For more information on neo-humanistic scholarship in Germany in this period, see Jaraus 1980.

Diehl steadfastly insisted, however, that American students «pulled back from a complete acceptance of German academic and scholarly values. ... Though appreciating the work of the most daring and advanced scholarship, they disavowed such endeavors. They saw the German academic system as an alien thing, an alien trade. ... Having been tempted by it, American [students, AN] made the modern form of scholarship as it developed in Germany an alien thing» (ibid., p100). Yet, herein lay the basic dilemma of interpreting American students' cross-cultural experiences in Germany in the nineteenth century. If they were, in fact, able to understand the ancient cultures they were studying, then why could they not understand the German culture they were experiencing firsthand? At issue in Diehl's interpretation of American students' experiences in Germany is the very *possibility* of cross-cultural understanding of the sort that American scholars sought when they studied ancient languages and civilizations. When Diehl wrote that American students «seem not to have learned any of the startling new philological techniques which in many cases they had gone to Germany expressly to assimilate,» he implied not only that Americans failed to understand their German mentors but also that they lacked the one thing that German neo-humanist scholarship required of them, namely, the ability to shed their own cultural or national perspective long enough or completely enough to see a «foreign» culture in *its own* terms.

It would seem from Diehl's analysis that the force that prevented Americans from understanding German scholarship in the early nineteenth century was not some repulsive or exclusive force in German nationalism in this period but, rather, a pre-existing force of Americans' *own* nationalism—a nationalism that deemed «foreign» ideas inherently and perhaps automatically inaccessible to the American mind. It is here that William Dwight Whitney's experiences at the University of Berlin in the 1850s can offer some insight into the nature and purposes of Americans' studies abroad. Not long after his arrival in Berlin, young Whitney managed to escape his fellow Americans and commence a detailed study of Sanskrit with some of the leading scholars in Europe. At a time when philology was thought to provide a sort of window into the «spirit» of ancient cultures, Whitney became an internationally recognized expert in Sanskrit, mastering Vedic texts and familiarizing himself with the latest discoveries in Persian, Arabic, Egyptian, Coptic, Hebrew, Greek, Assyrian, Phoenician, and Latin, as well as Old English, German, and French. Absorbing his German mentors' fascination with the evolution of languages and cultures, he earned his Ph.D. in 1853 and immediately accepted a position at Yale, where he established a graduate program in «philological science» and contributed actively to the proceedings of the American Oriental Society (founded a decade earlier as the nation's first professional academic association devoted to a specific field of study). By the age of thirty, Whitney had become the foremost Sanskritist in any nineteenth-century American university.

Whitney did not, however, restrict his attention solely to the study of Sanskrit. He also devoted considerable time and energy to the study of modern American English. In the 1860s, he helped prepare the fifth revised edition of Noah Webster's famed *American Dictionary of the English Language*, and, in the 1880s, he edited the massive six-volume *Century Dictionary: An Encyclopedic Lexicon of the English Language*, which was at the time the most etymologically complete dictionary ever published—in any language—in the United States. Both of these dictionaries contributed to a more general movement in the nineteenth century to codify a distinctly «American» version of the English language, with Americanized spellings, Americanized pronunciations, uniquely American rules of usage, as well as explanations of American regional idioms and colloquialisms. Whitney readily applied his philological training to these projects; indeed, in many ways, he saw them as the fulfillment

of the scholarly training he had received in Germany. In the first half of the nineteenth century, German scholars had used philological techniques to trace the cultural and linguistic heritage of the German *Volk* and, in the process, to bolster the case for a politically unified German republic. Whitney followed their example by using his own philological expertise to cultivate a more unified sense of American nationhood. In his mind, this task was a national duty: he had learned from his German mentors that no republic could survive without a common language to represent its common interests, and he hoped to contribute to the success of the still-new American nation.

It was clear that Whitney understood the nationalist aims underlying his German mentors' research. He learned what they taught, not only in terms of sharpening his skills as a professional Sanskritist, but also in terms of highlighting relations between language and nationhood in both ancient and modern periods. Yet, at the same time, mastering this «lesson» presented a paradox. While it grew out of real cross-national and cross-cultural scholarly exchange, it simultaneously pushed Whitney toward a heightened sense of his own national identity. The very methods of *neuhumanistische* philological research that he went to Germany to learn insisted (ever since J.G. Herder) that scholars encountering «foreign» cultures or «foreign» texts could only do so from a perspective tied to their own «essential» or «intrinsic» national identity. Thus, while Whitney may have learned what his German mentors taught, he could only do so as an *American*. Similarly, while he may have learned about ancient Indic civilization, he could only do so from an American point of view. Neither Whitney nor his German mentors ever doubted their ability to grasp the essential meanings of ancient Sanskrit texts. They believed not only that detailed textual analysis would lead them to accurate understandings of ancient civilizations, but also that they could impart their methods to students who would, in turn, make further discoveries leading to ever-more-complete and ever-more-accurate understandings of the past. And, yet, Whitney clearly assumed that his own students would learn to conduct philological research *not* as «Germans» but, rather, as «Americans,» because their national identity—like his own—was inescapable.

Herein lies the lesson of Whitney's story, the lesson of *identity* as an inescapable filter for knowledge in the modern world. By the time Whitney embarked on his career as a philologist, the notion had been planted that every scholar's work unfolded within a context of national identities. Nation-states had become the framework for *all* knowledge, and nationality had come to be seen as an immutable force in the shaping of human ideas. Though Whitney himself could not foresee the effects of this nationalist moment (he was too immersed in it), its impact was enormous. Henceforth, *all* scholars—as well as their subjects—would be trapped inside nation-states, and, over the course of the next century, nationalistic motives would be taken virtually for granted as an unavoidable feature of all modern research. Gone were Enlightenment hopes of cosmopolitan universalism. Gone were Romantic dreams of genuinely trans-national ideas. As German critic Max Boehm would note in 1932, «cosmopolitanism as a mental attitude always manifests itself in the form of a compromise with nationalism» (Boehm 1932, quot. in: Schlereth 1977).¹² And herein lay the tragedy of Whitney's generation of scholar-travelers in the mid-nineteenth century. Theirs was perhaps the first to become self-conscious about the role that nationality played in academic research—a self-consciousness that persists today. Can scholars escape the possibility that nationality or national perspective affects their work? Perhaps not. Indeed, it may be that even *this* paper's attempt to enter the spirit of another time

¹² For the decline of the cosmopolitan ideal in twentieth-century scholarship, see Clifford 1988.

and place for the sake of genuine cross-national understanding has become inescapably mired in (and distorted by) the trap of its author's national identity. Its author—like the neo-humanists before him—acknowledges this risk ... but hopes not.

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