

The Lack of European Awareness Regarding the African Continent The Case of Spanish Universities

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ABSTRACT

My objective is to discuss the issue of the lack of European awareness regarding the African continent, the birthplace of humanity, and the ethnocentricity which dominates the field of European academia. This attitude reflects the high self-interest of European society not only at home, but also in those places where it has extended its power. To this end, I will analyze and revise the history courses offered at Spanish universities in order to see precisely which ones offer education in the history of other continents in general and particularly in the case of Africa. Essential to this study is the knowledge of whether these courses are optional or obligatory. Connecting this academic context with European colonial history could well prove key to helping deconstruct false notions currently held about Western history being representative of world history.

1. EUROCENTRISM, IGNORANCE AND THE IMAGINING OF THE OTHER

Ethnocentrism entails a belief that the parameters and values defining a particular culture are qualitatively superior to any other. All cultures, in one way or another, tend both to exert some influence over others and to attempt to perpetuate themselves, although it would be unfair to argue that they all do this in the same way. If, as Silverstone (2010) claims, it is true that no identity can exist in the absence of a series of oppositions, it is also true that the historical events and processes that have defined Europe to date help to explain why Eurocentrism should have become one of the most exclusive systems of thought in the world. One such event in particular is undoubtedly the colonization of the Americas, for it is particularly at this point in time that European experience and outlook become transformed into a global vision in which not only are indigenous peoples considered primitive, ignorant and inferior, but so too is their way of looking at the world (Dussel 1992). Indeed, the concept of 'discovery' soon triumphs over that of 'conquest' in the conceptual mappings of European language, thus denying indigenous peoples, 'the other', any vestige of protagonism as shapers of human history.

Academically speaking, Eurocentric thought has been a manifest part, one way or another, of both the social sciences and the humanities throughout modernity and the history of contemporary Europe. Examples may be found in the explicit racism of certain strands of physical anthropology, which attempted to justify Western exploitation in the world by claiming a physical hierarchy between human groups – whether through the measuring of skulls or through the theorising of the origin of foreign cultures' mythologies. Both history and philosophy are also illustrative in this regard. Hegel's *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History* of 1837 (Hegel 1837) is an obvious example. Without a second thought, Hegel posits that the experiences of Africa and America lie outside history. Specifically in the case of Africa, Hegel unhesitatingly asserts a lack of the continent's historical interest, the complete absence of any technological contribution, and the barbarism of the way of life there. Such an ideology – while now possibly obsolete – is still clearly reflected in basic notions such as a division of Ancient, Medieval, Modern and Contemporary History which fails to take into account the timelines of Asia, Africa or Latin America: at the very least a sign of the minimal level of empathy towards other modes of viewing the world and a reflection of the hegemonic character of Western discourse.

As Edward Said (1996) has stated, this cultural battle by the West, one which employs notions and images of the 'other' rather than soldiers and canons, is also key to understanding Western culture. In this context, rationalism is seen as European heritage, the product of a system of thought which places Europe at the centre of World History, implying a definition of the periphery which in turn explains the very definition of European and Western culture itself (Dussel 2001). Such self-definitions retain at times a clearly racist character. Africa, for example, is not only considered part of this periphery; the sense of otherness is racialized, and '*is now both African and 'Negro', the latter being a necessary oppositional stereotype for the constructing of white identities*' (Henry, p.139)

In terms of Western portrayals of Africa, I would like to make reference to the work of Antoni Castel, *Malas noticias de África* (2008). Castel, by compiling

the conclusions of different authors' writings from the second half of the 20th century, shows how the negative image projected onto Africa in the West is also one which concerns our own definition of self. Here, Africa is presented as a place of disasters, of economic helplessness, of tribal conflicts based on primitive, irrational hatreds: it is a land in the thrall of religions and dictatorships. The underlying idea, however, is nothing less than that of a stable and peaceful West, composed of diverse and complex societies with democratic rule and popular sovereignty, whose religion and the state are separated and whose economic power allows for charitable intervention in Africa's problems. As such, Western violence, xenophobia and racism are hidden from sight together with the ever-widening gap in inequality, our shameful involvement in local conflicts, our unequal commercial relations with Africa, or the use of programs such as *Official Development Assistance* (ODA) as political tools in Western foreign policy.

2. THE INVISIBILIZATION OF AFRICAN HISTORY – A BRIEF LOOK AT THE SITUATION IN SPAIN

These portrayals of Africa in the West are not necessarily ones that have been clearly thought out; rather they have undergone continual distortion throughout our history. Yet the result is that Africa is nowadays seen as *'helpless, a fugitive in search of economic help and protection [...], either from Europe or from the U.S.'* (Iniesta 2006, p.11). In order to understand this, we need to look back at the history of relations between Europe and Africa. For Cheikh Anta Diop (2012), for example, recognising the links between Europe's technical superiority and its economic need for the exploitation and enslavement of black Africans is key to understanding the Western need to distort images of African abilities and morals. Such a contemptuous relationship, however, in no way impeded the commandeering of African resources, an appropriation which continues to this day. This is a relationship characterised both by ignorance of and prejudice towards blacks which dates back to ancient times and which reached the peak of its cynicism in the idea of 'the white man's duty', the perceived need to colonise Africa and educate its people to the same cultural standards as elsewhere. Here the double standard is evident, as Western interests are masked by a call to moral decency and responsibility; something very evident in the verses of Rudyard Kipling's poem, *The White Man's Burden* (1899). The poem, while it refers specifically to the situation of the North Americans in the Philippines, clearly reflects the way of thinking of a large part of Western society:

Take up the White Man's burden,
The savage wars of peace -
Fill full the mouth of Famine
And bid the sickness cease;
And when your goal is nearest
The end for others sought,
Watch sloth and heathen Folly
Bring all your hopes to nought.

As contact between the West and Africa became closer, such stigmas became more and more present in Western discourse. Through an association of the concepts *African* and *savage*, Africa was portrayed in a supposed state of cultural paralysis. Indeed, not only was being black associated with emotion and distanced from reason; until recently most schools of anthropology still saw non-Western cultures from the point of view of a one-way evolutionary process, with European society placed at the summit. A case in point is the general European view of Egypt, in which Pharaohs are seen as white and slaves as black. Champolion, for example, denied the possibility of the first Egyptians being black (Iniesta 1997). For Diop (2012), any such denial also implies the denial of the influence of black cultures on the birth of Greece, the mother of Western civilization. In contrast, Diop has argued that the Ancient Egyptian practises of totemism and circumcision, a vitalist conception of royalty – very much in common with the rest of Africa – together with the similarities between Egypt and other African cultures in cosmogony, social organization and the importance given to matriarchy, all typify Ancient Egypt as a black African culture.

Figure 1,2. Members of Egyptian Royalty



From left to right: the Pharaohs Narmer and Mentunhtep II, whose black facial features are evident.

As Iniesta points out (2007), this traditional perspective goes as far as denying there can be *any reading* of African history whatsoever, as prior to European colonisation no history of this kind supposedly existed. Africa, then, is still held captive by the Hegelian claims mentioned above: it continues

to be relegated to a non-historical status by a European thought full of ignorance, disinterest and prejudice. Proof of such a claim can be seen in the type of elitist university education given during the colonial era, one which ignored African history completely. In the case of Spanish colonial education in Equatorial Guinea, the main African quality presented was initially that of *savagery*. This in time gave way to another, related concept: the idea of black Africans as *homo infantilis*, which in turn placed more emphasis on the idea of an Africa whose people were in need of protection. Here again, features of Hegelian thought can be seen. Such propositions would become an argument with which to justify Spanish control and the colony's submission (Fernández-Fígares 2003, p. 18; Bandrés & Llavona 2010). In a similar vein, attempts were made to impose Spanish gender roles throughout Guinean youth society, as these were considered to be more dignified than local practices.

This Western conception of African savagery can be partially explained by reports of native populations made by European explorers. Manuel Iradier, the first Spaniard to write about the Fang of Equatorial Guinea, provides us with an exotic image of Africa in his writings in which cannibalism appears as a very real threat. This desire to attribute savage behaviour to African populations, however, was also common in the rest of Europe and stemmed from a longstanding medieval tradition later reinforced by European expansion in Africa. *Mission to Cape Coast Castle and Ashante* (1819) by Edward Thomas Bowdich, *Voyage au Como* (1861) by Braouezec or *Explorations and Adventures in Equatorial Africa* (1861) by Paul Belloni Du Chaillu are just some examples which paint a similarly savage image of African populations (Sánchez 2011).

Indeed, both literature and the press have played a pivotal role in the formation of the European image of Africa. Back in 1914, the writer José Más, author of novels such as *En el país de los bubis* (1919 - inspired by Fernando Pó, now the island of Bioko in Equatorial Guinea) strikingly denounced Spain's lack of knowledge of its Sub-Saharan colonies in the magazine *Africa Española*. Such was the level of ignorance that in the national press of the day one could, for example, read news reports that talked of problems with the colony's electrical wiring systems at a time when no cabling had even been installed in the area. The Spanish national press was also instrumental in pushing for campaigns in Africa as compensation for Spain's loss of its American colonies (Sánchez 2014). Newspapers would continue to feed on ideas and language drawn from a historically racist tradition

to the extent that later on some would even manage to elegantly accuse Nigerian workers who were then working on the island in conditions of semi-slavery of 'politely staging a growing invasion of the island' (ABC, 22nd January, 1964, '*Guinea y sus vecinos. Nigeria, al otro lado del mar*'). Even today, there exists in the press a distorted image of Africa that finds its origins in the colonial tradition. The recent treatment of Nigeria in the Spanish press is a case in point. The fact that ideas taken from the colonial era (such as that of Africa as 'the white man's grave') are still alive today can be seen in the recent extensive coverage given to the Ebola virus – even though it causes infinitely fewer deaths than either AIDS or malaria. The relevance here lies not, in fact, in the seriousness of the outbreak but in the possibility of its transmission to the 'white man'. Similarly, the general image presented of Nigeria is still one of violence and disasters, which in many cases are portrayed as implicitly related to either Islam or negritude (Maroto 2015).

Against this continual backdrop of invisibilization and distorted realities, we Europeans continue to remain ignorant of the history of our neighbours, one which is nevertheless very much a part of our own. It is high time therefore that we recognise our involvement in the historical events which have taken place in areas of the world such as Africa. I believe it to be a good way of decolonising our own selves, something which is tremendously necessary and which, as Jean Paul Sartre stated, involves the deconstruction of our own ethnocentric discourse with the help of new perspectives from researchers from other traditions from other parts of the world. To this end, and following Sanou Mbaye (2010), I would like to make special mention of Sundiata Keita, the founder of the Mandiga Empire and the originator of the Manden Charter (Kurukan Fuga) of 1222. The charter, now considered the first declaration of human rights, puts into question the idea that Europeans were necessarily the first to institutionalise ideals of fairness. The following extract is a clear example of the recognition of individual liberty, the endeavour for solidarity, and the opposition of slavery:

'The hunters declare: all human life is one. [...] but no life is 'older', more respectable than another. [...] The hunters declare: hunger is not a good thing neither is slavery; they are the worst calamities that can occur in this lower world. [...] from now on, nobody will place the bit in the mouth of his equal to lead him to sale; neither will anybody be beaten, much less executed, because they are the child of a slave. The hunters declare: from today, the spirit of slavery has

been laid to rest [...] Therefore, the hunters declare: from now on, each one is master of their own person; from now on, each one may act freely, each one has a right to the fruits of their labour. This is the oath of Manden, let the whole world hear.'

(Mbaye 2010, pp.133-4)

3. IS THE CURRENT EDUCATION SYSTEM ETHNOCENTRIC? A STUDY OF THE TREATMENT OF NON-EUROPEAN QUESTIONS IN THE SPANISH UNIVERSITY SYSTEM

Many would argue that education in contemporary society is to a great extent an instrument at the service of the state. It is hardly surprising therefore that the content of school education has become little more than a reflection of what the politicians and rulers of each era have wanted to transmit to the coming generations. Evidently, the very concept of education has not remained the same throughout these periods, given that it has itself undergone changes according to the historical contexts in question and has gone from being from a privilege limited only to the rich to an inalienable right for all as part of the welfare state. As we have seen, ethnocentrism was previously a reality in Western education and, despite the intervening years, Eurocentrism continues to dominate in education even as far down as infant school. It is for this reason, therefore, that Europeans of Maghrebi, Asian, or Sub-Saharan African origin often end up feeling excluded when they study a European history which refuses to take into account the ethnic diversity which modern European countries are made up of.

Nevertheless, such Eurocentrism goes beyond the education provided in Western countries. A study by Albuquerque and Ibarra (2014) concluded that with the exception of Argentina, Bolivia and the Dominican Republic, history education in Latin American countries focuses more on the history of the United States and Europe than on the rest of Latin America. They also highlighted how in Ecuador and Venezuela, countries with a marked Pan-American political discourse, both local and international history was studied with a noticeably Eurocentric emphasis to the detriment of Latin American study. Here, it is also worth noting the deficiencies commented on by Vega (2007), who highlights the fact that in many cases the Latin American context is studied in both middle and high school from a purely European perspective. Against this, Vega proposes the development of other, less Eurocentric models than those currently in use in education system and in universities in particular.

In terms of African education, Paul Tiyambe Zelaza (2009) has noted the paradox which existed under colonialism in African universities, who did not even teach African history and relegated the entire continent to the field of anthropological study. Although African education initially received a strong boost after the former colonies' independence, it later suffered under the structural adjustment programs of the 1980s and 1990s as governments cut education budgets and began to focus mainly on primary schools. Nowadays, however, there is competition between a number of dominant cultural positions, among which the *globalist*, *deconstructionist*, *developmentalist* and *culturalist* all stand out. Each of these is different from the other and each contains a different level of Eurocentrism. While, for example, the culturalist perspective has led to a more Afrocentric focus, numerous studies and new disciplines, the globalist has conserved hugely Eurocentric roots which —obliging Zelaza (2009, p.131) himself to ask the question, '*can African studies escape —even transcend— the Eurocentric coding, the seductions and sanctions of writing Africa by analogy?*'

Neither has criticism of the strongly ethnocentric element of university studies in Europe been lacking. In Introduction: *From University to Pluriversity: A Decolonial Approach to the Present Crisis of Western Universities*, Boidin, Cohen and Grosfoguel (2012) present a series of studies which clearly show the urgent need for European universities to reinvent themselves: to become capable of both adapting themselves to and of making use of an intercultural dialogue which might bring about a Pluriversity. The book criticises a number of different European universities. Among the most notable are papers criticising the university situation in Holland, where 'minority research' has been dominated by a dominant elite which considers minorities groups purely from the point of view of population dynamics (Nimako 2012), and where certain historians have tried to minimize Dutch involvement in the slave trade (Hira 2012). Another interesting paper by María Paula Meneses (2012) criticises, on the one hand, a Portuguese historiography which has tried to silence Portugal's colonial involvement and, on the other, a Mozambican historiography whose ambitions of creating a nation state have led to the silencing of the many and different historical accounts of the country's colonial experience.

In the case of the Spanish university and education system, there has been no real questioning of the Eurocentric model currently being followed. The criticisms and improvements proposed both in the

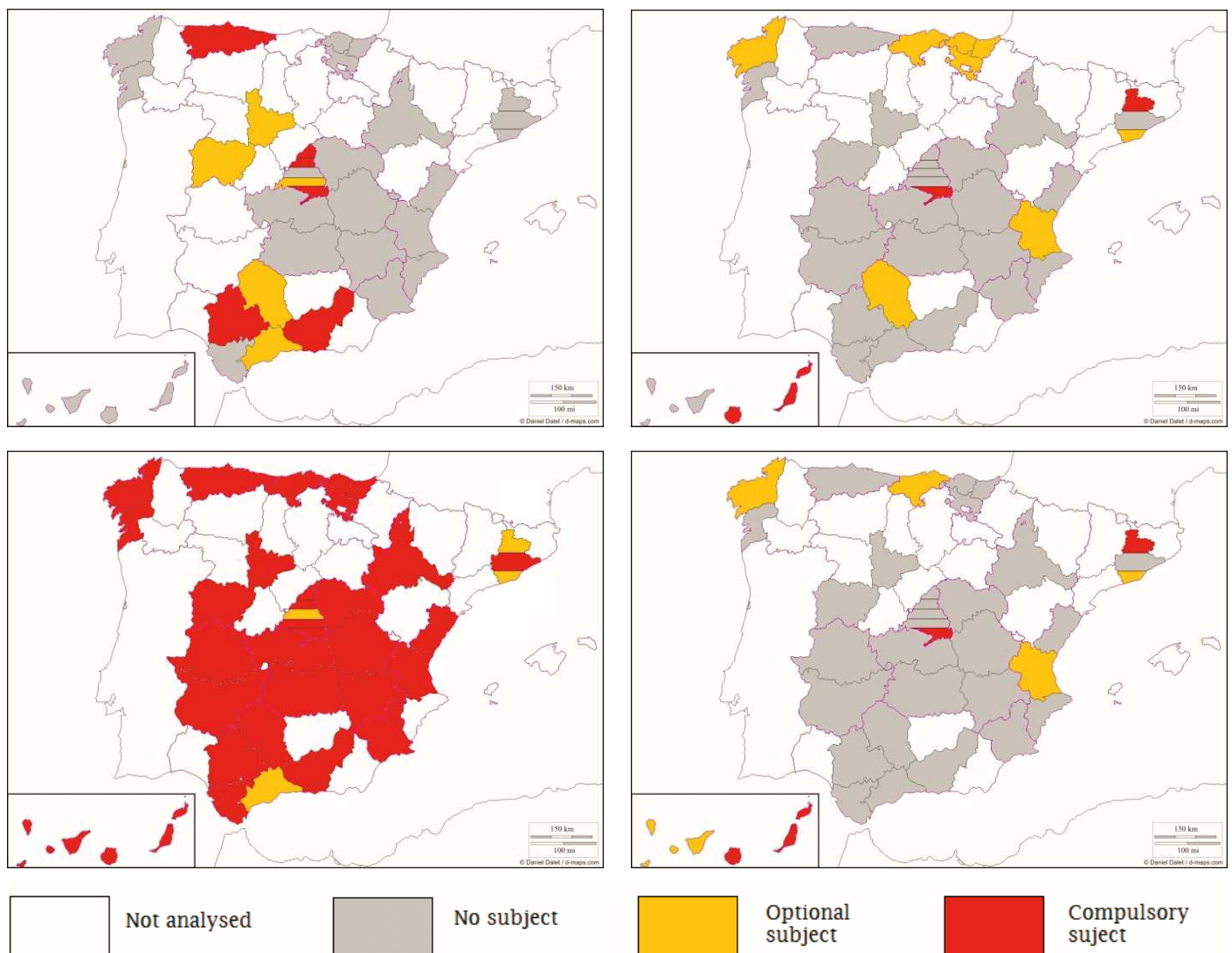
university system as well as the general education system at large have focused on problems brought about as a result of a lack of a centralised state education policy: the more than eight educational reform bills which have taken place in the last forty years; the controversial entry of private business in the state university system; and the need for a perspective which would take into account both gender and (in the case of historical studies) the multiple perspectives of state and regional political history, an issue which generates controversy to this day.

A cursory examination of current Spanish government legislation regulating the compulsory curricula of secondary and high school education (Edict thirty-seven of the BOE, passed on 03/01/2015) shows that non-European studies are practically non-existent. In fact, African issues are only studied as a brief part of one subject in final-year secondary studies entitled ‘the process of decolonisation in Asia and Africa’ which completely ignores the role of Spain

in the colonisation of Sub-Saharan Africa. This silence amounts to the erasure of more than 200 years of Spanish exploitation in the current territory of Equatorial Guinea at a single stroke. The problem is further exacerbated by a continued lack of familiarity with non-European issues at university level, despite the fact that universities supposedly enjoy greater autonomy in their choice of courses than do secondary schools. Indeed, the limited knowledge of both Africa and Asia made available in Spanish universities is an undeniable reality. An analysis of the courses currently on offer gives serious pause for thought over just how knowledge is built in the university system, both in Europe and in Spain in particular.

It is clear that both African and Asian studies form part of the periphery of university courses, to the extent that in some cases both continents form part of a single subject. Furthermore, Asian studies often focus solely on one country, the Philippines, and on little more than on Spanish influence there.

Figure 3. Non-European Courses Offered in Spanish Universities by Province



Middle East (above left), Asia (above right), Latin America (below left) and Africa (below right).

Incredibly, there is not a single course which focuses on the period of Spanish colonisation in Africa, much less one which might deal with the period before that, in which these lands were exploited by the Spanish upper classes.

Elsewhere, a very different phenomenon can be seen. Latin American studies certainly epitomise the idea that the history of Latin America is of interest only insofar as Europeans (in this case the Spanish) settled there. There is not a single Spanish university which does not offer courses on Central and South America; in fact, they are compulsory (see Figure 3). Nevertheless, the periods studied correspond only to those in which the Spanish were present, and clearly demonstrates that the academic interest herein lies in the importance of Spanish involvement. Indeed, it is a striking sign of academic priorities that courses on pre-Columbian periods should be so much scarcer and merely optional in nature. Or that in the few courses where a reference is in fact made to pre-Columbian peoples (such as the History of modern America course) this introduction is clearly designed to explain their political infrastructure as a precursor to understanding the process of conquest. Such Eurocentrism, however, is more complex than mere indifference towards 'the other', or a characterisation of their importance simply in terms of a Spanish presence. In the case of those courses which specifically focus on the history of the Middle East, what is interesting is that all make reference to ancient history, and all clearly state two fundamental ideas: 1) the technical superiority of the Middle East with regard to Europe at that time (for which reason it is considered a subject worthy of study); 2) a teleological vision of history, an idea with clearly Western roots in which advances are made in linear form towards progress. Nor is it strange to find a course on the history of Islam, yet this is always in relation to the presence of Islam in Spain.

4. CONCLUSIONS AND REFLECTIONS

The approach of European universities to the knowledge of non-European situations currently remains an extremely unresolved issue. While it is true that each country has approached the subject differently according to its particular historical context, it is also true that Eurocentrism is in force far beyond traditional Western borders, in parts of the world such as Latin America or Africa. In the case of Spain, two clearly different attitudes are evident. On the one hand, there exists an attitude of complete indifference and ignorance towards those situations considered to be alien, such as pre-Columbian

America, Asia, the Middle East or Africa. On the other, there is enormous interest in Latin America when the object of study is what is termed *Modern and Contemporary History* – a clear demonstration that academic interest in the continent is directly linked to Spain's physical or economic presence there. A third concern is the minimal, not to say zero, academic interest in the Spanish colonisation of Sub-Saharan Africa and the Maghreb. There is a sense here that history is being 'racialized', where the absence of light-skinned colonists in Morocco, the Sahara, or Equatorial Guinea seems more than motive enough to ignore a part of history which affects us directly. Here again, the whitewashing of yet another period of colonial exploitation apart from the Americas may well be a strong argument for avoiding the issue.

In Spain we continue to justify Hegelian ideas of other continents' lack of history to the extent that the Spanish university system seems a long way indeed from its purported emancipatory ideals – and further still from any model of *Pluriversity*. Against such a background it seems a matter of urgency that we ask ourselves whether it is possible to build the common, global projects which will be so necessary to our future if we do not accept that the peoples we speak to have structures of thought and epistemologies different from the West's, fruit of their own rich and diverse histories. We need to ask ourselves whether denying ourselves the historical knowledge of these cultures is indeed beneficial, or whether on the contrary, depriving ourselves of such information is not in fact an act of cultural suicide. It is time to recognise the diverse origins of the neighbours who make up part of our cities, to learn of their histories and of their cultures. Such a deepening of understanding can only help improve both our social relations and our sense of community. In this regard, it is a key that educational institutions start to give greater prominence to diversity. As I write, thousands of refugees are arriving in Europe from Syria, risking their lives because 'death comes but once'. In Europe we refuse to take them in, while other countries closer to Syria are caring for them with far fewer resources available. If we now fail to understand the history of our neighbours, if we are incapable of understanding their part in our own, if we are no longer able to empathize with the most destitute among them – then, to our great regret, the humanity of the West will eventually become something studied only in history books.

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CONFERENCE PROCEEDINGS

G200 Youth Forum 2016 Conference
April 6-10, Garmisch-Partenkirchen, Germany

INTRODUCTION

The G200 Youth Forum (Garmisch-Partenkirchen, Germany, 6-10 April 2016) was one of the largest international events organized for young leaders from around 200 countries in 2016, and over 200 young leaders, students and academics, representatives of the business world and governments were participating in it.

This was the 11th year of the Forum. Previous events were held in:

- 2006 – G8 Youth Summit – Russia (Saint-Petersburg);
- 2007 – G8 Youth Summit – Germany (Berlin);
- 2008 – G8 Youth Summit – Japan (Tokyo);
- 2009 – G8 Youth Summit – Italy (Milano);
- 2010 – G20 Youth Summit – Canada (Vancouver);
- 2011 – G20 Youth Summit – France (Paris);
- 2012 – G20 Youth Summit – USA (Washington D.C.);
- 2013 – G20 Youth Forum – Russia (Saint-Petersburg);
- 2014 – G20 Youth Forum – Germany (Garmisch-Partenkirchen, Bavaria);
- 2015 – G200 Youth Forum – Germany (Garmisch-Partenkirchen, Bavaria); and
- 2016 – G200 Youth Forum – Germany (Garmisch-Partenkirchen, Bavaria).

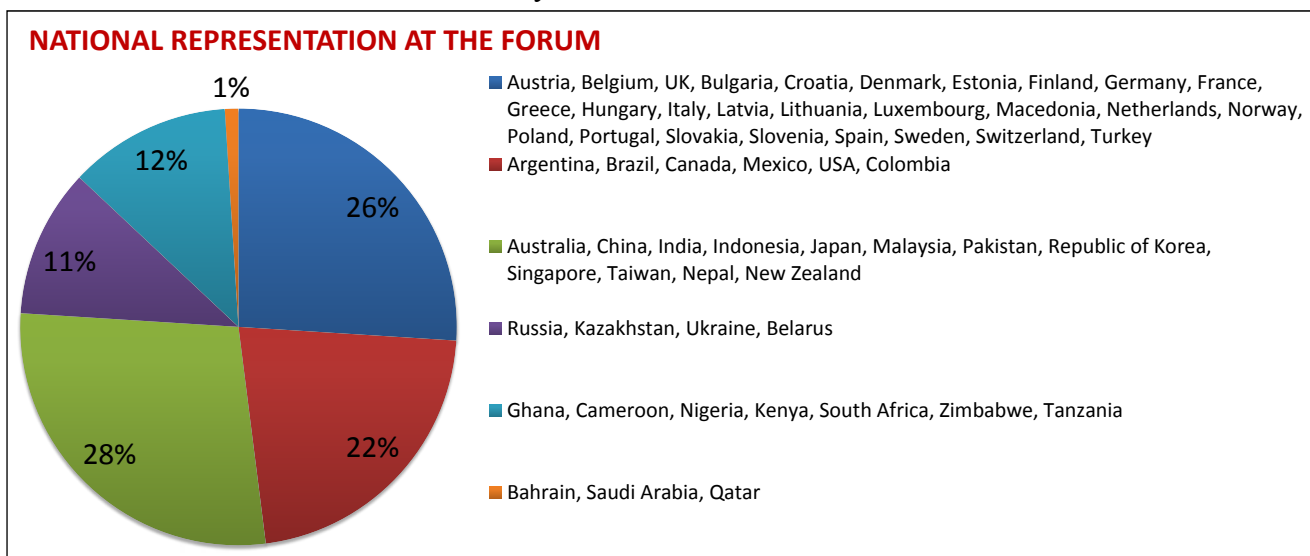
The G200 Youth Forum 2016 had 3 main events which run in tandem with each other:

- G200 Youth Summit – Communiqué
- Conference – Publication of academic articles in the Conference Proceedings
- International Young Parliamentarians’ Debate – Joint Statement

Conference 2016 was an international Conference for representatives from the best Universities in the world who were experts in international relations, law, economics, finance, technology, medicine, education and humanities. During the Conference around 300 participants discussed global problems which were on the agenda of the academic communities of different countries in the format of 8 round tables working in parallel.

1. Economics and Finance
2. Law and Human Rights
3. World Politics and International relations
4. Social Affairs and Medicine
5. Ecology, Environment, and Energy
6. Design, Technology, and Innovations
7. Education and Youth
8. Humanities: History, Philosophy, Linguistics, Arts and Journalism

In total: more than 4700 attendants in 11 years from around 200 countries.



The participants of the Conference were representing about 40 best Universities of their countries:

Al Yamamah University	Peking University
Bifrost University	Punjab Technical University
Centennial College	Tamkang University
Deakin University	Tianjin University of Finance and Economics
Erasmus University Rotterdam	Tokyo Institute of Technology
European University of Barcelona	Tokyo University of Foreign Studeies
European University, International Business School	The Ohio State University
Gadjah Mada University	Universidad Autonoma Metropolitana
Gambia Technical and Training Institute	Universitas Airlangga
Griffith University	Université de Lausanne
HEC Montreal	Universiteit Leiden
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