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An American in Canterbury: Blogging My Experiences

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My A With Honors Project for Spring 2011 consisted of keeping a blog. From January 9-April 9, I was studying abroad in Canterbury England, and my blog served both to inform my family about my experiences, and to discuss the issues brought up in Modern Britain, the British politics class for which I did my project. My instructor and I agreed that for completion, I would need to write 25 blog posts of 300+ words.

Below, I have included two blog posts from my time abroad. Both tell a story of more than just the events documented, but also of my growth as a person. Please enjoy.

Post #18: March 18th, 2011

Posted on [March 19, 2011](#) by [americanincanterbury](#)

Yikes, I realize I'm pretty behind on my blog posts. I promise to tell you about the visit to Stonehenge, Bath, and Oxford, and my last Modern Britain class in a few posts that will be coming soon. But today, I just want to focus on a few interesting cultural things.

For starters, Happy Red Nose Day! I never thought I would say this to anyone because I never knew such a day existed. March 18th marks a day of giving in the United Kingdom. A charity called Comic Relief collects millions of dollars from many different organizations around the country, and uses this money to help people both in the UK and in impoverished Africa. It is called Red Nose Day, because many famous actors will put together comical bits, or do crazy or hard things to raise money. One group for example, walked really far through a desert. And a few days ago, I saw a young woman on TV walking a tightrope strung between two buildings. Such people get other people to sponsor them and they contribute this to benefit malnourished children and other causes. Tonight I walked into my host family's house to find them in front of the television, watching the Red Nose Day program. This involved viewing free performances by famous people, heart-wrenching videos depicting squalid conditions in Africa, and more humorous comic videos depicting various actors and actresses acting silly to raise money. Already, Red Nose Day has raised over 50 million pounds, and the program is still going on...until two in the morning!

This program was interesting in more ways than one. Currently, I am working on my second Modern Britain paper. The question I have to answer is why the religious right in America has a presence in politics, but a group of this kind does not have such influence in the UK. In America, Church and State are separated, but in the UK they are not. So you would think Britain would be a much more religious country than it is. But not that many people go to Church when compared to America. Religion in Britain does not really have much of a place in politics. I think

religiosity in Britain is more of an undercurrent, where in America it comes to the forefront in the political sphere. Where the religious right in America addresses specific issues, I think Britain's government and people also address religious issues, but on the much broader scale of looking out for the welfare of others. Many posts ago, I told you that I pass charity shops on my way to school. These shops, like Oxfam and the British Heart Foundation set up stores in which customers who buy from them contribute to their organization. Volunteering in Britain is common. And one cannot look at the emotionally charged videos about the suffering in Africa and think Britain is merely a society turning ever more secular. It is really interesting.

I thought I'd save a little bit of British-ness for last. A few weeks ago, I cooked soup on the hob, (the stove top). I'll admit I sometimes dip biscuits in my tea, and at the store I bought a ten pound top up on my mobile. I go to a uni (university) and am taught by a tutor. Sometimes I have to think about whether to write a word like flavor, with an -or or an -our. A cock-crow (rooster) lives a few doors down, but he doesn't wake up early. There are some crackers that are also called biscuits. Soft cheese is cream cheese. Someone who is gutted is disappointed. And the rubbish (trash) goes out every week. "All right?" is a common greeting. Ah, this is Britain rubbing off on me. 😊

Post #22: April 1, 2011

Posted on [April 2, 2011](#) by [americanincanterbury](#)

Wednesday was my last Modern Britain class. Today our last paper for this class was due. And now all that is left is a British History and Modern Britain exam. Both will be next Wednesday. To prepare for these exams, I must pick two other questions (for each class) that I have not answered in any of my previous papers, and be ready to write about them. Each exam will allow us two hours to write.

Today, I will be writing about Immigration, the last topic in our Modern Britain class. So as always, happier thoughts are in the next post (when it gets written). 😊

This was an interesting class. First of all, since the term ended last week for the British students, just one British student was present in the class. The result is that we did not get a full perspective on immigration in Britain. However, I found the seminar discussion section to be very helpful this week. By listening to the American students talk about immigration issues in America, I feel that I understand immigration a bit better.

In seminar, some important ideas were shared. Did you know the United States does not have an official language? Some students in the section believe that English should be made the official language of the United States. They feel that when you go to another country, you should try to adapt to the culture in some ways. I know that with English, we are lucky. We can go almost anywhere and someone will be able to speak to us in our own language. But, I think I told you a few posts back that if I ever go back to France, I need to learn to speak the language. In this

country especially, I could feel that the French people wanted me to speak French. And I can definitely understand why. Language is a source of pride and a means of connecting with another culture. I agree that English should be the national language of the US and that immigrants be required to learn it. I do not think that immigrants should shed their native language or traditions, but should bring them to America. Moving to any new country requires adaptation and learning the language of the country you plan to be living in makes sense.

Then, of course, the issue of illegal immigration came up. What I have learned is that this is not a cut and dry issue. So many factors play into this issue. Our teacher reminded us that during good economic times, there does not seem to be a problem with immigrants. They are an easy means of cheap labor. But in bad economic times, we often make immigrants the scapegoat—they are taking all of our jobs etc. As to problems we are currently facing with immigration in America, I can see both sides. I can see the frustration of those who work hard for a living and see their money going into providing for those who have come here illegally. It seems unfair to those who go through the proper channels of entering America, to have many others going in before them illegally. But I also do see the other side, the side that my own Catholic faith makes clear: that when people live in dire conditions, it is our responsibility to help them out. But then I also understand that the US just can't let everyone in who wants to come into America. In seminar it was mentioned that it is not just a US responsibility to help the impoverished and the refugee, it is a UN one. So where is the balance? I think this is an issue that goes beyond money and economics, and into the realm of ethics. Another point made by my teacher is that each of us is the offspring of an immigrant who came to America not too long ago. I think it is also necessary to note that problems with immigrants are nothing new. They have actually been occurring even before America became a country. The Protestant/Puritan sects did not like the Catholics very much, for example. Many immigrant groups that would come later were also looked on with suspicion by immigrants who had been here longer.

Here is what I learned about British immigration. Interestingly, immigration to Britain did not become prevalent until after World War II. Many immigrants were invited in after the war to help rebuild a broken war-weary Britain. Immigration today is greatly focused on those who come to Britain from outside the EU countries. People who live in an EU country can travel, live, and work in other EU countries. Therefore, there does not seem to be many problems with immigration in the UK. But I am not sure this is completely true. I found a **March 2011 article** from the *Daily Telegraph* online newspaper stating that the UK is working to crack down on foreign students who come into the UK for below degree level courses. Some of these students take advantage of the system, obtain student visas, and then stay in the UK to work. Some of the ways for tightening the system will be having stricter language requirements for foreign students and not allowing most colleges (universities) offer below degree level courses to foreign students. Other articles tell me about the impact of the Muslim community on the UK, a population that has been growing in the UK. I sense in these articles the same anxieties about Muslim immigrants that Americans have about Mexican immigrants. Now of course I realize that the media is typically biased. But this does not erase the fact that these tensions exist in British society as well.

Immigration is an issue which often leads to race. Are we cracking down on immigration because we are racist? Are we afraid that the ideas immigrants may bring to our country will be

too different? What is helpful to remember, especially in societies like America, is that racism is a word often thrown around. To be a real racist is to act negatively toward people on the basis of their national heritage. I think we sometimes interpret actions of national and self interest, like cracking down on immigration, to be racism when it is not. This is not to say that racism does not exist in immigration policies, but we must be careful in deeming actions racist. Oftentimes, people are more uncomfortable with fact that immigrants seem to be taking all the jobs than the fact that they come from another country.

As I said, this is a sticky issue. I definitely see the point about helping those trying to escape desperate situations in other countries. It is morally wrong to let people die in other countries if we have means of stopping it. The question is: where do we draw the line? Or do we even need to draw a line? Can and should nations help all who ask for it? These questions have no easy answers. But this is all the more reason for governments to consider them carefully.

Also have included a reflection on what keeping a blog has meant to me. I will admit, oftentimes, it was hard. I did not want to debate the issues brought up in Modern Britain, and certainly not online. But I discovered that in order to learn, we must ask questions. Our experiences and values shape how we view and approach political questions.

Reflections on Canterbury:

What can you say about a place that has been your home for three months? How can you sum up a culture and a million different little experiences in one blog post? You can't so I won't try. But I will try to grasp at a few things I've learned, though I am sure the full impact of this experience will not really be known to me all at once. Little experiences at home might take me back to this place. And it is in these memories that I will remember Canterbury.

What have I learned? I have learned much, but some of it can't really be explained. I guess one of the biggest things I've learned is that so many factors play into who a person is. You can't define someone by their culture because different people reflect the culture differently. Although I understand that identity is a key factor in establishing what culture is, I no longer think it is completely necessary to understand a person's identity. In

reality, you can never know a person's identity. They themselves cannot even know their whole selves. And identity is so multi-layered. Experience, community, religion, race, political affiliation, personality—all these play into individual identity. Like so many strands of webbing identity between the individual and different infrastructures of society cross and recross and tangle together, until it is impossible to totally separate the person from them, because they have shaped the person into who they are today. Because our webs of experience often conflict with other peoples' webs, there is dissidence in the world today. It is not merely a lack of understanding, but a lack of being that person. I don't think identity can be tacked down.

I have also learned that I can voice my opinions on topics, be it in spoken or written form. I actually quite dislike controversy, but some things are worth speaking up for.

When I travelled home from two weeks in South Korea in 2009, I had it in my head that I wasn't the same person that I was when I left. I thought my life would be really different, that the problems I had when I left would be gone when I came back. When I came home, the problems were still there and I had not changed greatly. But I don't think that is ever what happens. I am still the same Lindsey who left for Canterbury three months ago. The fundamentals of my personality don't change, only very little things change. So yes, studying abroad has changed me, but only very slightly. It has taught me to ask more questions and to think more about what is going on in the world, and how the world perceives America and Americans. It has taught me to consider life from another perspective. I don't think I will ever know exactly how much this experience has impacted me. Like a stone dropped in water, the ripples are endless and endless. Or a mirror reflecting a mirror. The depth and breadth of experience touches corners of our lives and the lives of others that we can never imagine.

This is the last post for my blog project which was meant to document life in Canterbury during my three-month stay. I had never kept a blog before. I also had never had to discuss controversial issues in the

somewhat public forum of the Internet. It is my hope that my posts not only tell a story about my experiences, but also about who I am. I hope that the learning and growing I have done here is reflected in my work. This blog contains thoughts that I did not always have the courage or the words to express in class that I found easier to communicate through writing. Since this class was geared toward Modern Britain (British Politics) I would listen attentively in class and write down what my mentor was saying. Then I would address the issues he brought up in class. Many of these ideas will sound familiar to my mentor who will be grading this essay. I hope he will consider these posts as my response and outlook on the topics he taught. I hope it also shows what I have learned about the British culture as well. Through considering and addressing political issues, I have been able to develop my voice, to make my opinion known. As a person who does not like to offend others, I have qualms about my project and its subject matter since politics can be a sticky issue. But my mentor encouraged us not to be afraid to share our beliefs, and so I have. In a world with so many different ideas, it is often hard to answer political questions without considering the social, moral, and political impact of these questions. It is my hope that my project conveys an understanding of the topics discussed in the light of a personal outlook.

In conclusion, I would say that blogs are useful tools for bringing the ideas of the individual to others. Like an online notebook, one can share views in the light of their experiences. I think my blog posts speak more about me than my telling a person about me could. It is my hope that these posts help the reader to think, and not only to think, but to ask themselves the same questions I have been asked.