

■ Litteraturgranskningar

Elizabeth Murphy-Lejeune:
*Student Mobility and Narrative
in Europe: The New Strangers.*
London: Routledge. 2002.

IOANNIS TSOUKALAS¹

For the last couple of years I have been engaged in the study of the European Union student exchange program, Erasmus. During the last decade this program has resulted in an unprecedented exchange of ideas and persons within the European Union. Vast numbers of students are circulating within the European Union, often spending several months in other host countries before returning to their home universities. The phenomenon is in need of systematic study.

However, my research on the Erasmus students has a wider purpose than a mere descriptive account of their lives. Within the framework of the KOSMOPOLIT project a central task for me is to try and ascertain whether the Erasmus program is a locus for the incubation of a more transnational kind of life-style and social identity. Thus issues of youth culture, social learning, collective representations, friendship networks and identity formation are central to my study.

Here I will mostly not discuss my own ongoing research but instead review a recent important book on European student exchanges. Elizabeth Murphy-Leje-

une's (2002) book *Student Mobility and Narrative in Europe: The New Strangers* is the first extensive study of the various categories of travelling students within Europe.² Murphy-Lejeune is a French studies scholar living and working in Dublin, Ireland, with a clearly anthropological twist to her work. The book deals with many of the themes that are central to my research as well, and is a good introduction to this field of research.

When I first found this book it came as a very positive surprise. For almost a year I had looked for studies of student mobility within Europe and found very little. Given the radical impact that many of the exchange programs of the European Union have had on academic life across the continent, this study fills an important gap. One can even say that the effects of these student exchange programs have been so strong, with the Erasmus program being the main engine in this impressive thrust, that university life in Europe has been changed forever. Murphy-Lejeune (2002: 8) is well aware of this and thus of the mission of her book 'to meet the need to explore European student mobility'.

The study she undertakes adheres, though not strictly, to a qualitative, phenomenological approach and tries to capture and analyze the subjective side of the student exchange experience. The only previous academic studies in the area were strictly quantitative, and thus very little

1 Ioannis Tsoukalas är verksam vid institutionen för socialantropologi i Stockholm. E-post: ioannis@socant.su.se

2 The book is actually a revised reprint of her PhD thesis (in French) which was published more than ten years ago in the field of linguistics.

has been known about the actual lives of these students, and even less about their own views and opinions on various topics. Murphy-Lejeune (2002: 8) is explicit in her ambition to remedy this unfortunate situation and clearly states that her intention is to 'try and account for the definition of the experience by the actors themselves, an often neglected source of information.' Three different categories of exchange students – the Erasmus, the EAPs³ and language assistants – are successively presented, analyzed and compared. The methodology she uses is clear. A variety of methodological tools have been used in order to arrive at, and triangulate, conclusions: interviews, questionnaires and case studies. The only caveat I can think of in respect to methodological issues is that the sample of students she used was a little skewed, with most students coming from, or going to, France and Ireland.

The theoretical lineage of the stranger

Murphy-Lejeune's theoretical preferences are with a number of classical sociologists, many of them phenomenologically inclined. The writings of George Simmel and Alfred Schutz on the status and experience of strangers in the western world serve as a point of departure. It is partly a consequence of this that her book does not join the often uncritical chorus of voices blessing the increased global connections of our time but also offers readers a darker side of the picture.

3 The EAP is a French student exchange program for students studying business administration. It stretches over a three year period and includes residence in Paris, Oxford and Berlin or Madrid (not both).

According to many of the older writers, the traveler to new lands is a stranger with a special status and perspective.⁴ This "stranger theme" recurs throughout Murphy-Lejeune's book and is actually the thread that integrates much of the analysis of her empirical material. The traveling students are considered as a recent addition to this wider category which also includes the migrant, the expatriate and the refugee. According to Murphy-Lejeune, being a stranger has serious consequences psychologically, socially and symbolically. Examples of negative consequences are loneliness, confusion, and sorrow. This said, however, the picture is in the end mostly positive.

A cartography of strangeness

More specifically Murphy-Lejeune attempts to make a modern cartography of "strangeness" in Europe, using as her material the three groups identified above. Thus she compares them with each other as well as with other types of strangers, and tries to place them in some relative perspective within the scene of contemporary Europe. She thus notes that the Erasmus students are harder to integrate in their host societies than EAPs⁵, au-pairs and language assistants, due their lack of professional duties which gives them ample opportunities to escape into

4 This special status of the stranger is universally recognized. It is therefore no coincidence that sociolinguists have found out that foreigners/strangers are all over the world addressed, upon first contact at least, with a distinct and characteristic speech style which resembles that used with young children ("motherese") and mentally retarded individuals (for references see Hogg and Abrams, 1988: 195).

5 The EAPs have a period of work apprenticeship included in their education.

various enclaves, some self-chosen and some ordained, some comprised of compatriots and some of internationals. In like manner students in general (including EAPs) are harder to integrate in their host societies than working strangers like au-pairs and language assistants.

Murphy-Lejeune also points out that big cities make it easier for foreign students to avoid integration with local society. The anonymity of modern urban centers make them a perfect habitat for all kinds of avoidance behaviors, subterranean cultural flows and covert activities; so too for visiting exchange students preferring the company of their compatriots or other foreign students. In contrast many of the students who ended up in villages or small towns achieved very satisfactory degrees of adaptation and integration with local society.

The general tendency is that students living abroad like to sneak away into their favorite enclaves unless counteracted by stronger forces.⁶ The company of one's compatriots is undeniably relaxing and comforting. This tendency is also fuelled by the natives who tend to see visitor's as categorical others and treat them accordingly. As a visitor in a country there is a risk that you become, whether you like it or not, an ambassador of your home country; and your "nationalism" is thus unwittingly strengthened. In my own research I have met at least a couple of Erasmus students who really wanted to become integrated into Swedish society, even learn Swedish, but could not really make it. Many of the Swedes they knew wanted to use them to learn a foreign language instead – for example Italian and French – and thus preferred them to be real "latinos".

Who travels?

Which kinds of people end up abroad as exchange students, and which stay at home? Not everyone is equally eligible for international travel, not even within the seemingly equitable confines of the Erasmus Program. Thus people with a special personality character, family history, first encounter and age tend to have an advantage in achieving international mobility. This blend of factors, we are told, make up each individual's mobility capital. And these determinants are just a special case of the influence that socioeconomic and historical context has in determining the degree and kind of mobility available to various people. Even today, in anno 2005, one can suspect that working-class youths

6 Some evidence for this is offered by de Federico (2001) who have made a network survey of the relational patterns found among Erasmus students:

"When we examine friendship ties, we realize (in the sample of Erasmus students we gathered in France in 1995) that 63% of the friendship ties established are crossnational friendship and only 37% are same nationality. If we look in more detail, we see that 37% of friends are same nationality, 43% are other European exchange students, 17% are local European students and 3% have other non European Nationalities. Given that the population of the hosting university is composed by 92% of local students, 6,2% of non-European students and 1,4% of European exchange students, if there were no factors influencing the selection of friends, European exchange students would have 92% of local student friends (they have 17%), 6,2% of non-European student friends (they have 3%) and 1,4% of European exchange student friends (they have 80%). Taking into account these figures we can conclude that similarity of status (being an exchange student) and what it implies seems to be the most important factor of friendship choice." (de Federico, 2001: 12-13)

are underrepresented in the big “family” of exchange students. Though Murphy-Lejeune has no statistics to prove her point, many of her empirical findings are suggestive and they certainly accord well with my own personal experience of exchange students.⁷ Exchange students are a migratory elite, quite different from many other categories of traveling people.

Despite these qualifications one can suspect that the Erasmus program has functioned mostly positively. It is almost certain that it has increased the formal opportunities for students of all socioeconomic backgrounds to travel within the European Union. Still, given the fact that formal opportunities are not always translated into real opportunities, more quantitative research would seem to be needed to show us how things really turn out.

Adaptation and culture shock

In common for most students, whether they end up well integrated or not, or start out poor or rich, is that they go through a phase of adaptation and various degrees of culture shock. A certain degree of confusion and discomfort is to be expected. However, as time passes, most people adjust themselves to the new situation. Slowly and by way of imitation of natives and role-experimentation, the students become more and more comfortable in navigating the new sociocultural terrain. Yet the adaptation process is not uniform for everybody. It varies according to several variables, and Murphy-Lejeune attempts an identification and classification of these, often assisted by the voices of the students themselves. Thus we learn that the accommodation issue (finding a place to live in; finding someone with whom one can share quarters) is of crucial importance in conditioning their future

adaptation to the new milieu. Likewise the general conditions of their entrance/im-

7 The quantitative studies mentioned above give some support to this contention, though not conclusive. We can see in their tables that about 35 % of the Erasmus students had a father with a higher education degree, while the proportion of parents with at least compulsory education was even higher, on average (for both mum and dad) close to 40% (Mainworn et al 1991: 34-35). This the German scientists take as proof of the fact that the Erasmus program does not only cater for the needs of people from high socio-economic backgrounds. However this is a dubious conclusion. First of all we are not told the degree of educational attainment for parents of a comparable group of non-student youth (which might be much lower) and we are not told the percentage of analphabetic parents (or with discontinued studies) from southern countries which we know is still comparatively high, even in the current generation of students. What happens to the children of parents with discontinued studies? I personally know that many of them end up in low-paid jobs and only travel occasionally and internally. The proper comparative background is conspicuously lacking in these instances. Thus at least some of the averages in this study hide potential discrepancies in educational outcomes.

As for the national origins of the Erasmus students we learn from the same study that “about five percent of the students surveyed were from Denmark, Ireland, Greece and Portugal” (Mainworn et al 1991: 20). This is also an indication that smaller countries might be less able to participate on equal grounds. In this case Denmark does probably not even truly belong to this group. It just ends up in this group due to fortuitous factors (being a small country with a small student population) while the other three are probably united in their common relative poverty. We are also informed that “students from various southern European countries had less experience of staying in foreign countries” (Mainworn et al 1991: 37). In any case given that these measures are old and several ones of interest are lacking more quantitative research is needed to ascertain the question of who travels and why. Especially when it comes to the question of national origins I believe the statistics are too outdated to be taken as evidence for today’s situation. National participation in the Erasmus program today seems to be fairly equitable according to my information, with small countries some time even having an advantage. The fact that these small nations were underrepresented to such a degree might depend on the fact that in the early years of the program it took a bit more time for small countries to build up the necessary “stem” and catch up with the traditional trioka of founding nations (Germany-France-England). The threshold for participation was higher for obvious reasons.

mersion into the new country (administrative trouble, health incidents, bad experiences with natives) are also important. Finally a decisive role is also played by various kinds of cultural brokers (mentors, teachers, roommates) who via their interest in foreign people and their self-appointed patronage guide the newcomers gently into society.

Murphy-Lejeune does not deny that there is often culture shock, even in today's highly mobile world. Moving to a foreign country, or even visiting it, can be a very upsetting event (unless one is a complete tourist), and in most cases this intercultural encounter begs for an explanation; sometimes even rationalization. Still Murphy-Lejeune does not completely buy into the standard model of intercultural adaptation, and although she does not reject it, gives it a thorough and critical re-evaluation in light of her new findings. She points out that many of the students in her study do not undergo any radical turmoil and only notice minor psychological movements.⁸

She notices, moreover, that many of her students experience a certain culture shock upon return to their home country. Beside the practical readjustments they have to make in order to revert to their former lifestyle, they also have to live with the incomprehension and indifference of their friends and relatives who most of the time just do not understand what they were doing over there and what they went through. This shock is more psychological and moral in character, and more upsetting. This 'reduction of one's personhood', as one of the students I studied called it, not being seen for what one has become, can be as painful as the one they experience as strangers in foreign land, not being seen for what they are. Given that there are upsetting moments in inter-

cultural encounters, Murphy-Lejeune finishes this part of her discussion by offering some advice to administrators and officials handling the "live-stock" of moving students. Before going away students should be advised to seek involvement with local society and avoid isolation from locals. That would only make their stay more difficult.

Reaching out and meeting up

As I mentioned above, Murphy-Lejeune's account ends on a quite positive note. Therefore her initial restraint and her pragmatic approach, letting much of her students speak for themselves, adds to the trustworthiness of her work. Despite all the restrictions and limitations in the various exchange programs and the circumstances that surround them, which probably prevents most students from coming close to integration in the host country,

- 8 For those knowledgeable in the issue of culture shock and intercultural adaptation there are a number of popular models illustrating these psychosocial processes. One of the more popular ones is the U-curve of intercultural adaptation (for example it is explicitly used at Stockholm University). This is a broad pattern stretching over the whole stay abroad and includes "two big ups and one big down". This is the model that Murphy-Lejeune revises. Thus she postulates several minor curves instead of the big U-curve and a tripartite division of the whole period (usually of six months) into an euphoric, a tribulation and a constructive phase. Also she very wisely adds in the impact of previous experience, given that many youngsters today are very well traveled (some of them could actually and without shame be called traveloholics), which results in further modification of the model. Experienced people just go through a trial phase and a constructive phase. For more details on the intercultural adaptation discourse see Dahlén (1997).

many students still make it through and manage to get in touch with the local society and its inhabitants.

Most of the exchange students start out in a similar way; many of them actually from the same physical location as exemplified by the town, the campus or the residential area to which they are “attached”. Thus most students have access to three types of social contacts at the outset of their stay abroad – ethnic, international and native people – with whom they interact in various degrees and for various reasons. From this pool of people the exchange students pick and chose in order to construct a rudimentary social space. In this gradual process three degrees of intimacy of contacts are discernible and Murphy-Lejeune enumerates them for us: close friends, party partners and acquaintances. Simultaneously with this furnishing of their ‘social living room’ the exchange students launch their exploration of the host country. This again is a gradual and cautious process for most young people, with the exception of experienced travelers, who through expanding concentric cycles of spatial familiarization make themselves comfortable. To the degree that the students succeed in their social and cultural exploration of this new ‘life space’ they will feel at home away from home.

The terms ‘dislocations’ and ‘islands’ bring forth the idea of separation and disconnection between the old and the new world. The discovery of new spaces is then conceived as crossing ‘bridges’... From one known space to another, the ‘bridges’ which are established are often represented by the specific individuals or activities associated with the place. Interestingly, students pick up quite naturally well-known metaphors to

translate their experience of strangeness. (Murphy-Lejeune 2002: 154)

Up to this point most exchange students are alike. From there on, however, their trajectories diverge, and most of them veer off unpredictably in directions uncharted by social scientists. Still one can discern two rudimentary blocks: the majority and the minority. The minority consists of those young men and women who succeed in getting in touch with the native population. Murphy-Lejeune gives some interesting clues as to what makes them succeed, while the rest fail or simply do not care. For one thing professional experience seems to be important for integration. The language assistants seem to be the best-integrated category of students, despite the fact that their mobility capital is fairly limited. Their systematic engagements with local society and language skills are of critical importance.

A special perspective

As mentioned earlier, Murphy-Lejeune believes that the traveler to new lands is a stranger with a special perspective, able to see things in a more ‘objective’ way than many of his compatriots back home or the natives in the new country. This is allegedly due to the stranger’s ambivalent position to distance and proximity, and his frequent oscillation between the two. This theoretical tradition is an endowment from some of her intellectual ancestors, and she tries to make use of it in her current study. Although this epistemic choice may seem out of place in today’s hyperconnected world, her account is both interesting and convincing. And the whole presentation is nicely illustrated by many examples from her interview materials.

Using this ‘stranger theme’ she also tries to effect a connection to another theoretical tradition, that of liminality and rites-de-passage, and thus tries to cross-fertilize sociology with anthropology. This is a brave and potentially interesting move, but somehow she does not really follow it through theoretically (see more on this in the final section). She only uses the older view of van Gennep, sparingly for that matter, and not the more recent perspective of Victor Turner (Turner, 1995). This is probably a pity since Turner’s theories, especially his discussion of the transformative effect of *communitas*, would be highly pertinent to her study. Despite this “miss” she is not oblivious to the transformative potential of a stay abroad, but gives it a serious treatment.

A final word

Murphy-Lejeune’s very good book is one of the few qualitative studies we have on student mobility in Europe.⁹ It is easy to read and understand, and discusses many interesting and pertinent subjects. In closing this review, I would nevertheless want to air some criticisms.

The mix of genres is sometimes a bit confusing, and annoying. With her shifts in styles of narration and analytical depth, it is not always entirely easy to understand from which theoretical or epistemological vantage point Murphy-Lejeune writes. It is at times difficult to know if the weight of her argument rests on theory or on the

empirical results, and where her findings end and her personal opinion starts. I would also have preferred a more continuous theoretical argument; only the first chapter is explicitly devoted to theory. It is true that Murphy-Lejeune point out that she is primarily interested in the narratives of the students themselves, but precisely because she presents so much empirical material some further theoretical elaboration might have been helpful. Empirical findings cannot always stand alone.

Some further attention to theory could have included more discussion of other recent research on cross-border mobility and related matters, including conceptualizations of networks, risk society, and cosmopolitanism. For a book on narratives, this one has notably few references to classical and recent research literature on narrative theory. It is not that Murphy-Lejeune fails to support her argument successfully – she does, using her own means – but the theoretical ramifications of her argument could possibly have been taken further. There is no serious mention either of other kinds of narratives that may interact with those of her students, such as media narratives, or the political narratives of the EU. We see in Alexa Robertson’s contribution to this issue how media narratives of global connections can interact in intricate ways with those of ordinary people as audience members. It seems probable that media have a formative influence on the students’ narratives.

The book is also a little weak on illuminating the administrative side of the student exchange enterprise. Thousands of people are employed in academic institutions to cater for the increased bureaucratic needs caused by the onslaught of exchange students. Murphy-Lejeune does not tell us much about this aspect, although it can be legitimately suspected of

9 In the English language that is. From conversations with a French colleague – Frédéric Dervin at Turku University, Finland – who is also working with the Erasmus I learned that there are more qualitative studies to be found in the French literature. Possibly the same may be true for several other languages.

having an important influence on the students' personal and collective experiences.

Again, despite these minor criticisms this is a fine book. One of its greatest merits is that it offers a very thorough scholarly account of some of the cultural processes currently reshaping our transnationally connected world. And it does so from the grassroots upward. This micro perspective is very welcome as it is frequently lacking in accounts of globalization, which sometimes build on little more than conjecture. In this way the study also sheds empirical light on bottom-up processes of globalization and cosmopolitanism. In the case of the exchange students of Europe much of their new aptitudes and self-descriptions, what may be their burgeoning cosmopolitanism, grows out of their spontaneous and self-organizing activities, often out of reach for interventions by their elders. This is encouraging to find substantiated in a book.

The personal narratives and experiences that we are treated to in this book are full of emotions and passions, and although at times troubled and perplexed, they most of the time convey an optimistic spirit. This might not be the best of worlds to live in, whether at home or abroad, but its momentous transformations make it a most exciting one! It is full of promise and suspense, and this tense anticipation is felt throughout the book, born out of the students' own experiences and mediated skillfully by Murphy-Lejeune. If there is a cosmopolitanization going on in the world, at least in the cultural sense of the word, then this is how some of it looks in Europe (see also Szepenszki and Urry, 2002). The exchange students of Europe could be on their way toward becoming the new world citizens of to-

morrow; people at home in the world and with mobility as an ordinary habit.

Europe is certainly not the whole world, but European unity, if successfully achieved, could be a stepping stone for a more ramifying form of human interconnectedness and shared consciousness. For that reason alone the European exchange students are worth a study like this one. Perhaps we are heading towards a 'small world'; many findings point in that direction. In that case we will need our "little cosmopolitans" to help us navigate this new terrain. A new mind set is anyway required. Perhaps it is already in the making.

Life abroad is a powerful experience of discovery of self and others because it shakes personal and social representations and introduces into identity processes perturbing elements, notably the notions of moving identities and flexible cognitive borders. This challenge of redefining self and others is open to a great many individuals now that Europe offers students a new stage on which to position their identity.

(Murphy-Lejeune 2002: 30)

References

- Dahlén, Tommy, 1997. *Among the Interculturalists. An Emergent Profession and its Packaging of Knowledge*. Stockholm Studies in Social Anthropology.
- de Federico, A., 2001. *Networks and Identities: Borders of Solidarity and borders of identification of European exchange students*. Conference Paper Presented at 'Networks and Transformations' at Manchester University.
- Hogg, M. A., and Abrams, D., 1988. *Social Identifications. A social psychology of intergroup relations and group processes*. London: Routledge.
- Mainworn, Friedhelm, Steube, Wolfgang, and Teichler, Ulrich, 1991. *Learning in Europe. The Erasmus Experience. A Survey of the 1988-89 Erasmus Students*. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

- Murphy-Lejeune, Elizabeth, 2002. *Student Mobility and Narrative in Europe: The New Strangers*. London: Routledge.
- Szerszynski, Bronislaw and Urry, John, 2002. Cultures of cosmopolitanism, *The Sociological Review*, Vol 50, Issue 4.
- Turner, Victor, 1995 [1969]. *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*. New York: Aldine de Gruyter.