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## Exporting American values: Raynard Swank revisited

Peter Johan Lor

### Introduction

[SLIDE 1]

When Prof Weech invited me to do this lecture, he reminded me of comments I had made quite a few years ago when I was teaching in Milwaukee as a visiting professor and came to Urbana-Champaign to present a guest lecture on International and Comparative Librarianship. I had spoken (Terry said) “of issues related to the issue of American assumptions that all the values of ALA and American librarianship should be adopted by IFLA and all countries, although the values in many countries suggest that American values may not be appropriate.” I don’t remember this all that clearly, but I’m game to look at this topic.

I took the topic of my lecture from an article in *Library journal* by Raynard Swank (1963), “Six items for export: international values in American librarianship”. Swank was the Dean of the School of Librarianship, UC Berkeley, but before that he had been the director of the ALA’s International Relations Office at a time when the ALA was deeply involved in international library work, including a range of development aid projects in the Third World. He knew what he was talking about. The USA was then, and to a large degree remains today, the absolute world leader in librarianship.

You have read the article, and I’ll talk about it in a minute, but I’m not going to lecture on it. Rather I’m using it as a pretext for what will be a rather meandering exploration of the notion of exporting values. You also need to know that I will cite and make some critical observations about Americans. I lived in the USA for only two-and-half years, but for much longer I have been an interested observer of the American cultural and political scene. I have observed it with a mixture of sympathy and horrified fascination – the latter especially during election campaigns, which in the USA are more or less all the time. I think the USA is a beautiful country – we did a couple of road trips while we were here, and Americans on the whole are kind, generous and well-meaning people. We made a lot of friends. So it is not my intention to castigate, but to raise awareness of how well-meant attempts to help, advance, and develop other nations, may be perceived and received elsewhere.

I want to start with three quotations.

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The first is from **Henry Luce** (1941), famous American magazine magnate (1898-1967) who founded (or co-founded) *Time*, *Life*, and *Fortune* magazines, among others. In 1941 Luce wrote an editorial in *Life* magazine which was to have a significant influence on American thinking on foreign policy. Luce was advocating for the USA to abandon its policy of neutrality, and enter World War II to defend democracy. He wrote:

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“In the field of national policy, the fundamental trouble with America has been, and is, that whereas their nation became in the 20th Century the most powerful and the most vital nation in the world, nevertheless Americans were unable to accommodate themselves spiritually and practically to that fact. Hence they have failed to play their part as a world power - a failure which has had disastrous consequences for themselves and for all mankind. And the cure is this: to accept wholeheartedly our duty and our opportunity as the most powerful and vital nation in the world and in consequence to exert upon the world the full impact of our influence, for such purposes as we see fit and by such means as we see fit (Henry Luce, “The American century”, Life, February 17, 1941).

Here we see an assertive, confident American exceptionalism. Luce was trying to budge that damn pendulum away from isolationism toward internationalism, or at least, constructive involvement.

**QUESTION:** How do you respond to this today?

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The second quotation is from **Alistair Cooke**. Cooke (1908-2004) was a British-born journalist who emigrated to the USA in 1937. In March 1946 he started a series of weekly broadcasts for the BBC on life in the USA, known as his “Letter from America”. It was listened to by millions. The series lasted 58 years (2,869 instalments), coming to an end shortly before his death at the age of 95 in March 2004. Cooke did not confine himself to the Washington Beltway or to politics, but travelled throughout the USA, reporting not only on major events, but also on the lives of ordinary Americans. His writing was characterized by a sort of sympathetic detachment enlivened by sly British humour. On occasion, when reporting on tragic events, it took on a quite moving elegiac quality.

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Broadcasting to his British audience on May 6th, 1946 in one of his earliest “Letters from America”, Alistair Cooke said:

“If you feel baffled and alarmed at the prospect of differentiating one American type from another, you can take heart. You have more hope of success than Americans, who shuffle through every stereotype of every foreign culture as confidently as they handle the family’s pack of cards. Americans are not particularly good at sensing the real elements of another people’s culture. It helps them to approach foreigners with carefree warmth, and an animated lack of misgiving. It also makes them on the whole, poor administrators on foreign soil. They find it almost impossible to believe poorer peoples, far from the Statue of Liberty, should not want in their heart of hearts to become Americans.” (Alistair Cooke, “The immigrant strain”, May 6<sup>th</sup>, 1946, p.4).

Remember, this was broadcast in 1946. In the mean time you’ve had the Cold War, the Korean War, the Vietnam War, 9/11, Afghanistan, Iraq and lots of smaller conflicts, and now you are threatened by millions of migrants from south of the Border trying to get in before Mr Trump puts up his big wall.

**QUESTION:** Have things changed?

I note that in another one of his radio talks, Cooke wrote about the inability of British actors to speak with genuine American accents. In part that is because they are unable to distinguish between the many different accents found in the USA. He also had harsh criticism for a British editor who, shortly after Lyndon B Johnson succeeded to the presidency, sent him a wire asking him to write a piece on Johnson against a background of “cowboys, oil millionaires, huge ranches, general crassness, bad manners etc.” Johnson was not that kind of Texan at all, having come from a hardscrabble county in central Texas where farmers struggled to make a living from raising goats. This editor’s request showed a rank ignorance and prejudice of someone who thought he knew America. Cooke’s phrasing, on the other hand, was not unsympathetic.

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But let me show you one last example, this one of a quite startling reaction to an overly sympathetic American. In a blog in the *Christian Science Monitor* in 2010, outspoken South African writer Osiama Molefe wrote the following rather acerbic comments on a lecture given in South Africa by the noted African American author, Alice Walker:

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“[Walker] travelled to Uganda and met the warm, lovely, generous African. In Kenya, the same African was there, too. This African also followed the professor to South Africa. I am tempted to suggest that this warm, lovely, and generous African existed nowhere else except in Walker’s mind. She came *home*, she came to the *motherland* carrying [a] caricature of an African and she dressed every black person she met in it, perhaps without ever having experienced each individual genuinely.

[...] I am an African. Sometimes I am lovely, sometimes I am not. Sometimes I am a brute and other times, a doll. And unless you lay down your preconceived ideas about me, our interaction will leave us both poorer.”

<http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Africa/Africa-Monitor/2010/0915/Alice-Walker-and-the-caricatured-view-of-Africa>)

**QUESTION:** Do you think Molefe was unkind?

I think it illustrates a general point that I would like to make about international librarianship – whether you travel, conduct research, advise and consult, or get involved in development aid projects – it is unwise to base your interactions on stereotypes. You need to understand where people are and where they are coming from. That includes trying to understand their culture through an investment in sensitive observing and listening. And then, in praxis, to steer clear of the ecological fallacy that all members of a given culture are the same.

Now to get back to values. Swank wrote about exporting values. In my course at UWM I devote time to innovation and policy borrowing. I have found this diagram to be useful:

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**QUESTION:** Assuming you want to export some of the fine attributes and undoubted benefits of American librarianship, which do you think will be easiest to export – successfully, or course, meaning that this export will be valued and will confer lasting benefits?

Here's my take on this:

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I would contend that values are probably more difficult to export than most other things.

Now let's turn to the American values that Swank suggested should be exported.

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Several questions arise from this list. Is it still valid today? Would you substitute some of them? And then, for the purposes of this class:

**QUESTION:** which of these are the most and the least exportable?

Let me now home in on one of the values. I'll chose No. 5, that sacred cow of American Librarianship, Freedom of Expression.

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“Sacred cow”? That's not going to make me popular in Urbana-Champaign! But to many people in other parts of the worlds, the US First Amendment seems to be raised on a pedestal and accorded quite extraordinary and even unreasonable respect – albeit not as unreasonable as that accorded the Second Amendment. In both cases -- remember, from the outside looking in -- there appears to be an extreme fundamentalism, an unwillingness to compromise even in the slightest degree, an unwillingness which is based on distrust or fear. The fear is that if you give way just one inch, the other side will take the whole mile. This is the domino theory, which has played such a large and disastrous role in US foreign policy. (Think of the Vietnam War.) Many people in other countries, especially in the developing world, simply can't get as worked up about freedom of expression as their American colleagues would like them to be.

I experienced this at first hand when I was the Secretary General of IFLA during 2005-2008. During this time I had some oversight of FAIFE, IFLA's strategic programme dealing with Freedom of Access to Information and Freedom of Expression. FAIFE was funded by the Danish aid agency, DANIDA and based in Copenhagen. Their work was modelled on that of IFEX (<https://www.ifex.org/>), the global network defending and promoting free expression. Some violation of freedom of expression affecting libraries would be reported, then FAIFE would carefully verify that this was indeed a problem, the draft a press release about the matter, which I would sign. Here's an example of such a case:

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From 1990 to 2006 the former Soviet Republic of Turkmenistan (in Central Asia) was ruled by a despotic and erratic president, Saparmurat Atayevich Niyazov, He was

concerned with restoring the glory of the Turkmen people. To this end, inter alia, he wrote a book, the *Ruhnama* (the book of the soul), a rambling collection of (pseudo)history, spiritual and moral guidance, and poetry. “The *Ruhnama* was introduced to Turkmen culture in a gradual but eventually pervasive way. Niyazov first placed copies in the nation's schools and libraries but eventually went as far as to make an exam on its teachings an element of the automobile driving test. It was mandatory to read *Ruhnama* in schools, universities and governmental organizations. New governmental employees were tested on the book at job interviews.” (Wikipedia, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ruhnama>). Everyone had to carry a copy around with them. Matters came to a head as far as libraries were concerned when he closed all but a handful of libraries, reportedly because people did not need to read any books other than the *Ruhnama*. This report was carefully verified, a press statement was released and a formal letter of protest was sent to President Niyazov. It is not known whether he received it, but if he did, he paid not the slightest attention.

This was a bizarre case, more like a comic opera. But IFLA was repeatedly pressed by American librarians to protest violations of freedom of expression in countries such as China, Cuba, and Egypt. Cuba was a particular problem. A New York-based outfit known as the “Friends of Cuban Libraries” funded the establishment of small free libraries in homes of Cubans who resisted the dictatorial Cuban regime. Some of them were harassed and imprisoned. The Friends of Cuban Libraries continually pressed for IFLA to take a stand against the Cuban regime. Other Americans, including the ALA, were opposed to this. Many felt that since this Friends organization was being funded by the CIA and was aimed at achieving “regime change”, it lacked credibility. Battles fought in the ALA council meetings had repercussions at IFLA General Council meetings where anti-Cuban resolutions were tabled. These were deftly dealt with by IFLA presidents and not brought to the vote. Cuba was really a proxy battle between liberal and conservative American groups. The basic problem here was that American-style political actions were being demanded of IFLA, an international organization. American political culture is very macho or confrontational. The parties involved were “yelling” at each other. There was no real debate. In the USA, it seems, compromise on principles is seen as weakness and it is unacceptable.

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From IFLA’s point of view nothing was to be gained by statements and resolutions. Our librarian colleagues in the affected countries would be embarrassed and might face sanctions if we criticized their countries. They could not, without risk, support such actions. During my tenure as SG I helped steer FAIFE away from the reactive mode of issuing press releases and letters of protest, towards more indirect ways of promoting freedom of expression, ways involving consultation with librarians in the affected countries, trying to support them, avoiding confrontational situations, and using mechanisms such as workshops for building mutual understanding and trust. Examples of such activities can be accessed via the FAIFE “Past Activities” web page (<http://www.ifla.org/node/620>).

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Basic human values are probably universal, but in different cultures they rank differently. A Dutch social psychologist, Geert Hofstede, developed a model to explain differences in organization cultures and business cultures in different cultures. I recognize that many scholars are sceptical of Hofstede, but his work has been widely

used in management science, and I believe that it offers useful insights. Hofstede identified five cultural dimensions:

(The following is largely verbatim from Geert Hofstede's website, available <http://www.geert-hofstede.com/>, accessed 2009-03-02.)

- **Power Distance Index (PDI)** that is the extent to which the less powerful members of organizations and institutions (like the family) accept and expect that power is distributed unequally. This represents inequality (more versus less), but defined from below, not from above. It suggests that a society's level of inequality is endorsed by the followers as much as by the leaders.
- **Individualism (IDV)** on the one side versus its opposite, collectivism, that is the degree to which individuals are integrated into groups. On the individualist side we find societies in which the ties between individuals are loose: everyone is expected to look after him/herself and his/her immediate family. On the collectivist side, we find societies in which people from birth onwards are integrated into strong, cohesive in-groups, often extended families (with uncles, aunts and grandparents) which continue protecting them in exchange for unquestioning loyalty.
- **Masculinity (MAS)** versus its opposite, femininity, refers to the distribution of roles between the genders which is another fundamental issue for any society to which a range of solutions are found. The IBM studies revealed that (a) women's values differ less among societies than men's values; (b) men's values from one country to another contain a dimension from very assertive and competitive and maximally different from women's values on the one side, to modest and caring and similar to women's values on the other. The assertive pole has been called 'masculine' and the modest, caring pole 'feminine'.
- **Uncertainty Avoidance Index (UAI)** indicates to what extent a culture programs its members to feel either uncomfortable or comfortable in unstructured situations. Unstructured situations are novel, unknown, surprising, different from usual. Uncertainty avoiding cultures try to minimize the possibility of such situations by strict laws and rules, safety and security measures, and on the philosophical and religious level by a belief in absolute Truth; 'there can only be one Truth and we have it'. The opposite type, uncertainty accepting cultures, are more tolerant of opinions different from what they are used to; they try to have as few rules as possible, and on the philosophical and religious level they are relativist and allow many currents to flow side by side.
- **Long-Term Orientation (LTO)** versus short-term orientation: this fifth dimension was found in a study among students in 23 countries around the world, using a questionnaire designed by Chinese scholars. It can be said to deal with Virtue regardless of Truth. Values associated with Long Term Orientation are thrift and perseverance; values associated with Short Term Orientation are respect for tradition, fulfilling social obligations, and protecting one's 'face'.

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Here are four graphs illustrating findings of surveys undertaken in various countries. Remember, don't fall into the ecological fallacy. We are not saying that all Americans are strongly individualistic, moderately comfortable with uncertainty, and tend to short-term thinking. These are attributes of American business cultures in general. Within populations of people and organizations, there is, of course, a lot of variation.

**QUESTION:** Which cultural factors can be adduced to explain the differences between the US and international approaches to issues such as the Cuban free libraries? (Here I suggest you look at the bottom left graph for “World Average”.)

In this talk I have skirted the issue of cultural relativism. The hierarchy of values differs from culture to culture. For example, loyalty to one’s extended family, one’s clan, or the cohort in which one underwent rites of passage, may rank higher than abstract notions of justice, impartiality and integrity; hence what we might see as nepotism is widespread in many developing countries. Here, not caring for your sister’s children enough to help your nephew get a government job might be regarded as a grave lapse of moral duty.

Does that mean that anything goes, that every culture is entitled to arrange its social relations in its own way? That there is no absolute right or wrong? That would be the approach of extreme cultural relativism, where decisions about right and wrong, and specifically about human rights, are culturally determined. I note here that our Western notions of human rights, including freedom of access to information and freedom of expression, are also culturally determined. They have their basis in certain individualistic Western cultural norms. In many non-Western cultures group rights and concerns such as those of family, community, clan etc. are seen as more important than the rights of individuals. In the developing world there has been much criticism of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. It is seen as an attempt to impose Western values of the rest of the world.

It is not surprising, therefore, that many countries that are UDHR signatories turn a blind eye to human rights abuses and that we find countries with appalling human rights records elected to membership of the United Nations Human Rights Council.<sup>1</sup> Generally the thrust of such bodies and of international NGOs in the field is to promote equal rights irrespective of individual characteristics, promoting recognition of the rights of women, children, LGBT persons and other minority groups. But in effect, this is the exporting of Western values.

Most of us find ourselves somewhere between the extremes of total relativism (moral anarchy) and moral absolutism. We would find some cultural practices to be strange, others disturbing, and yet others to be abhorrent. Some practices, although distasteful, we might be prepared to tolerate when we observe them abroad. Other practice we find so abhorrent that we would lend our assistance in rooting them out wherever they occur, even though they may be deeply rooted in certain cultures. For example, child marriage, honour killings and female genital mutilation.

The important thing is to listen and observe first, before jumping to judgment. To conclude, cultural sensitivity is crucial in international librarianship. Understanding that people in other countries may have a different hierarchy of values – one you do not share – will help you in both research and practice. Aid and influence can be more effective the more you know about the recipients.

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<sup>1</sup> For a list of the current 47 member states, see the Council’s website at <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/HRC/Pages/CurrentMembers.aspx>. In any given term at least half a dozen of the member states have very questionable human rights records.