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Groningen

Arenberg-Coimbra Group Prize 'Thank You' Text

It is an honor to be named the recipient of the 2014 Arenberg-Coimbra Group Prize for Erasmus Students. I would like to take this opportunity to thank the Duke of Arenberg and the Arenberg Foundation for funding this prize, and others like it, and promoting cultural exchange in Europe. I would also like to extend my gratitude to the members of the prize selection committee for acknowledging my hard work and choosing me as this year's laureate. In addition, I wish to thank the faculty and staff of the Euroculture departments at Göttingen and Groningen Universities, as well as the faculty and staff of the philosophy departments at Göttingen and Heidelberg Universities, who helped in the course of my MA studies. Lastly, I want to give a special thanks to Inge Knudsen, Esther von Richthofen, and Katrin Fehl, for helping make my appearance here in Groningen possible. To live and study in Europe was a remarkable experience, and I am grateful to everyone who impacted it in a positive way! Thank you!

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Europe is a fascinating place. Not simply because of its enthralling past, but also because of the interplay among the diverse cultures that coexist there today. Although modern Europeans enjoy a degree of peace and unity that is unprecedented on their continent, there is still much work to be done in the project of uniting Europe, and some, Euroskeptics, even believe that this European Union is bound to fail. Due to my passion for this topic, multiculturalism and the EU, the Erasmus Mundus Master of Arts in Euroculture offered at Georg-August-Universität Göttingen was the perfect match for me. This interdisciplinary, two-year MA program focuses on the social and political dimensions of Europe and the EU, and grants students enough latitude in their studies to concentrate on the aspects of these that they find most interesting. To help ensure the 'European nature' of the degree, Euroculture students are required to perform an Erasmus exchange at a second European university. Because of my interest in Dutch culture, as well as the course offering and reputation of the university, I decided to spend the spring/summer semester of 2012, the second semester of my Euroculture degree, at the Rijksuniversiteit Groningen (RUG) in the Netherlands. This Erasmus exchange in Groningen proved not only to be useful in expanding my knowledge of the Dutch, and thus European, culture, one of the express aims of the Euroculture degree, but also greatly contributed to the success of my MA thesis.

I believe studying abroad is the best way to learn about a foreign culture. Rather than merely reading about it in a book or hearing about it from others, when one studies abroad, one *lives* it. In other words, for a truly rewarding Erasmus exchange, learning takes place not only within the classroom, but outside of it as well; and this was certainly the case during my time at the RUG. Before enrolling in the Euroculture program, I had already studied the Dutch language for several semesters and continued to do so for all three semesters in Göttingen and, of course, during my stay in Groningen. Although virtually all Dutch citizens speak English, minimizing most communication issues, being able to speak Dutch in a Dutch-speaking country opens up all sorts of doors that one could not have had opened otherwise. I was better able to integrate myself into Dutch society, understand those around me, and could thereby experience this foreign culture to the fullest degree: I lived with Dutch students; I ate Dutch food; I learned about Dutch history and customs; I worked in Groningen as a member of the Euroculture Curriculum Committee; and I spoke Dutch at every opportunity – in stores, with professors, and most of all with other students. In this way, the Erasmus exchange in Groningen gave me the opportunity to improve my Dutch language skills, which, in turn, allowed me to more easily assimilate into the Dutch community and gain a better understanding of Dutch culture, one of the primary goals of my Euroculture semester abroad. At the end of my studies in Göttingen I graduated with Dutch as a 'key competence' (*Schlüsselkompetenz*) on my diploma and, in addition, was awarded a full-scholarship from the Dutch Language Union (*Nederlandse Taalunie*) to return to the Netherlands for a 3-week Dutch language and culture course during the summer of 2013. Ultimately, my Erasmus exchange in Groningen was particularly invaluable in that I was not only able to greatly improve my skills in a foreign language, but I also used this foreign language to gain a greater understanding of Dutch and European culture.

In addition to the linguistic aspect of my Erasmus exchange and the (cultural) knowledge I acquired outside of the classroom, the courses offered in Groningen were also essential to the success of my MA thesis and the degree as a whole. For instance, one research seminar I completed at the RUG, "*Integration Processes in East Asia and Europe*," offered a fresh perspective on the now-quite-familiar problem of European integration. By examining and comparing the content and organization of Europe's EU with Southeast Asia's ASEAN, I enhanced my understanding of cultural integration processes in both the Asian and European contexts. Another RUG course that significantly contributed to my MA experience was '*Eurocompetence II*.' The aim of *Eurocompetence*, a project management course, was to organize a

symposium about the economic crisis in Europe and what it means for the EU's future. Starting without a budget and only minimal support from the Euroculture faculty and staff, my classmates and I, including eleven students from eleven different countries, came together to organize a substantial public event. Despite our differing nationalities and academic backgrounds – and, by extension, our differing opinions as to how a symposium should be organized and conducted – we were able to achieve our goal through effective intercultural communication. I played a critical role in this project by helping to liaise with various Dutch support organizations, raise money from sources within Groningen, and choose an appropriate venue for the symposium at the RUG. A third Euroculture course that played a pivotal role in my MA studies, and particularly in my MA thesis, was 'Theory and Methodology,' whose aim was to familiarize students with research methods within the social sciences. This course came in handy not only for my MA thesis, but for all of the research papers that I wrote during and after my semester in Groningen, including my IP paper, which will be discussed below. In the end, as a result of these courses, I was able to strengthen my intercultural communication skills, gain knowledge about integration processes in the EU, and learn more about performing research in the social sciences, key aspects of the Euroculture degree.

After the mandatory Erasmus exchange, the first year of the Euroculture MA culminates in the 'Intensive Program' (IP), a conference where students from all eight Euroculture partner universities come together to participate in various lectures and seminars led by experts in fields pertaining to Euroculture. Each student also writes and presents a paper corresponding to the specific theme of the IP, which in 2012 was 'cultural citizenship and European identity.' For me, this paper was of particular importance as it eventually led to the conception of my MA thesis topic. My inspiration was initially drawn from a study-trip from Groningen to the European Parliament in Brussels, where I first learned of the then-recently-launched European Citizens' Initiative (ECI). At its core, the ECI, set out in Article 11-4 of the Lisbon Treaty, allows 1 million EU citizens to call upon the European Commission to propose legislation that falls within its competences. This is achieved by collecting signatures, online and/or on paper, signifying support for a specific legislative proposal. If 1 million supporting signatures are collected within the given timeframe, fulfilling set signature quotas in at least seven EU member states, the European Commission is required, at the very least, to carefully read the proposal and consider suggesting legislation based on it to the Council of the European Union and the European Parliament. Even before its launch, major media outlets throughout Europe, including BBC News and the German *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, were already hailing the ECI as a groundbreaking introduction of transnational direct democracy to the EU. It was this claim that spurred the conception of my IP paper, entitled "The European Citizens' Initiative: a Tool of Direct Democracy?", which looked to establish if or to what extent the ECI can be seen as the arrival of transnational direct democracy in Europe. This was an important topic as a flawed understanding of the ECI, that is, believing that the ECI is a tool of direct democracy even when it is not, could result, at best, in inefficient use of this tool and, at worst, in frustration and misuse thereof. In the paper, with the help of the knowledge I gained in the 'Theory and Methodology' course mentioned above, I derived a set of criteria for determining the presence of direct democracy in certain political systems and tools and used it to conclude that the ECI is *not*, in fact, a tool of direct democracy and *would not* usher in a new era of direct democracy in the EU as prophesized by various newspapers and websites. Ultimately, my IP paper earned the highest possible grade and was eventually selected to be published on the RUG's website (<http://irs.ub.rug.nl/ppn/369202864>).

More important perhaps than its excellent grade and publication, the IP paper also served as the first steps in writing my Euroculture MA thesis, entitled "Can the European Citizens' Initiative Address the European Union's Democratic Deficit?" This was a natural question given the results of my IP paper – if the ECI is not a tool of direct democracy, can it at least promote democracy in other ways? If so, how? The primary task of my MA thesis was therefore to determine how and to what extent the ECI could address the EU's alleged democratic deficit. This required in-depth discussions of the ECI's regulations and procedures as well as the precise nature of the democratic deficit in the EU and even the concept of

democracy itself. After a detailed analysis of the latter two, I identified a number of key criteria for evaluating the ECI in terms of its ability to address the democratic deficit in the EU, the most important of which pertain to *citizen control of the agenda* and *effective citizen participation*. The thesis then proceeds by dividing the ECI into three phases – the organizational phase, the signature collection phase, and the ECI presentation phase – and determining, at each phase, to what extent citizens are participating effectively or exerting control over the EU legislative agenda. Drawing on data from a great variety of sources, including newspaper and journal articles, blogs, ECI campaign websites, and Eurobarometer surveys, among others, I ultimately reveal the ECI to be a questionable means for seriously addressing the EU's democratic deficit, concluding that it provides only a limited line of communication between citizens and EU-level politicians.

To begin, my research indicates that the great majority of EU citizens are unlikely to be able *and* willing to participate in organizing ECIs. The significant planning and capital required to launch a successful ECI seems to indicate that experts and specialists as well as organizations, including traditional NGOs, but perhaps also including for-profit companies, will be necessary, thereby limiting the role of the individual citizen. Furthermore, during the signature collection phase of the ECI, technical issues pertaining to online signature collection systems and associated data protection fears have hampered the ECI procedure, causing significant problems in terms of effective citizen participation. Lastly, even assuming that an ECI collects 1 million valid signatures in the allotted timeframe, the ECI is *non-binding* and as such can have only a symbolic impact on the EU political agenda. Once an ECI is presented to the Commission for consideration, citizens are, at best, *indirectly* involved in the ECI process. Nonetheless, my research indicates that the ECI is by no means a lost cause, and I identify and discuss a number of possible improvements including, for instance, standardizing personal data requirements for supporting ECIs across EU member states and providing a centralized, EU-maintained online platform for launching, discussing, and supporting ECIs. Looking to areas of potential future research, the thesis concludes by briefly examining the question of whether the ECI could address the *structural*, as opposed to the procedural, democratic deficit in the EU, that is, whether the ECI could help in the formation of a European *demos*, and indicates that this is an issue that unquestionably requires further investigation.

Although I wrote my thesis primarily in Göttingen, after completing a full-time internship there at the university's Institute for International and European Law (*Institut für Völkerrecht und Europarecht*), my thesis greatly benefited from my time at the Rijksuniversiteit Groningen. First, the work done in Groningen for the course, *Theory and Methodology*, mentioned earlier, assisted considerably in the writing of my published IP paper, which, in turn, further inspired and aided in the writing of my MA thesis. In addition, unlike most Erasmus students, whose contact with their host universities is limited once an exchange is completed, as a Euroculture student, I was able to benefit greatly by a continued affiliation with the RUG. For example, while writing my thesis I was able to access numerous journal articles online through the RUG's library website and take advantage of other library services as well. Most important, however, was the fact that I benefited from having official MA thesis advisers in both Göttingen and Groningen. In this way, I remained under the guidance of my adviser in Göttingen as I wrote my thesis there, but also kept in close contact with my adviser in Groningen through email and even an in-person visit during my final semester of the MA. It is therefore clear that my Erasmus exchange in Groningen played an integral role in the completion of my MA thesis by helping provide the foundational knowledge and inspiration necessary for doing so and, additionally, by allowing me to take advantage of important resources at the RUG, including library access and an official thesis supervisor.

Finally, although not an official Erasmus exchange, I believe it is important to mention one other exchange that had a significant impact on my studies in Göttingen. Before starting the Euroculture MA program, I had previously spent one year at the Coimbra Group university, Ruprecht-Karls-Universität Heidelberg in Germany. After completing my BA in Philosophy, I was awarded a one-year fellowship to continue my studies at Heidelberg University, free of charge. While earning my Euroculture MA in

Göttingen, I simultaneously earned a Philosophy MA, transferring the credits from my time at Heidelberg in order to lessen the workload of two MA degrees. The courses I completed in Heidelberg, pertaining, for instance, to Kant, Fichte, Hegel, and Nietzsche, indisputably enhanced my MA studies in philosophy by improving my knowledge in two of my areas of focus within the field: German idealism and morality. Many of these courses also provided information that was applicable to my (second) MA thesis, entitled "Grounds of Obligation: Resolving Moral Conflicts in Kant's *The Metaphysics of Morals*." In this thesis I examined the only passage in Kant's published writings where he discusses moral conflict from a theoretical perspective. This passage remained largely overlooked in the field of Kant scholarship until the late-20th Century when interpretations of it, often turning on a key, yet inadequately defined, concept, *grounds of obligation* (*Gründe der Verbindlichkeit*), began to surface. Thus, after explaining the basic tenets of Kant's moral theory and examining several of the more plausible interpretations of the passage at hand, the task of my thesis was to provide my own analysis and interpretation of this passage, specifically by focusing on a novel conception of the term *grounds of obligation*. After introducing and justifying this new conception, the thesis goes on to cast doubt upon many of the more popular interpretations of Kant's passage and then looks to apply it in order to resolve apparent inconsistencies in his moral system. In the end, I gained new insights into Kantian philosophy and morality, and also contributed to an ongoing debate within contemporary Kant scholarship. By enhancing my knowledge of Kant, morality, and philosophy in general, my experiences in Heidelberg undoubtedly played a crucial role in earning my MA in Philosophy at Göttingen University.

To conclude, from what has been said above, it is clear that my Erasmus exchange at the Rijksuniversiteit Groningen was invaluable for my MA studies. The courses taken at the RUG, the improvement of my Dutch language skills, and working in the Netherlands ensured that I learned a great deal about Dutch culture, other topics pertaining to Euroculture, such as intercultural communication and methodologies in the social sciences, and thereby gained the maximum benefit from my time in Groningen. In addition, the positive feedback I received for my paper, written and later published in Groningen, concerning the ECI, as well as my own personal interest in the subject, led to my choosing to examine this political device as the topic of my MA thesis. For this I continued to benefit from my time in the Netherlands by retaining access to the RUG library and, more important, being assigned a thesis adviser in Groningen. For my Philosophy MA, which I earned at Göttingen University concurrently with the Euroculture MA, my stay in Heidelberg was also highly beneficial. Now, with my MA degrees behind me, I intend to study law at a top university in the United States, where I would like to specialize in international and European law. For this reason, I am certain that the knowledge I gained and the skills I developed during the course of my MA studies, particularly in Groningen, will be instrumental in my future studies and career. Yet, accomplishing this dream will assuredly *not* be inexpensive, and I therefore humbly submit myself for consideration for the Arenberg-Coimbra Group Prize for Erasmus Students, as I believe my time spent as an exchange student played an extremely crucial role in my MA studies, and particularly in my MA theses, and will continue to play an important role in my future studies and career, thereby distinguishing me as a highly qualified candidate.