YFU SYMPOSIUM ON INTERCULTURAL EXCHANGE AND DEMOCRATIC ENGAGEMENT

Youth Diplomacy and Strategic Vision

Javier Fernández-Lasquetty

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Good afternoon. I have been asked to open this final conversation by looking forward: what can intercultural exchange contribute to societies that need confidence, imagination, and citizens willing to engage with a more complex world? My answer is simple. Its deepest contribution is personal. And because it changes people, it eventually becomes civic, political, economic, and diplomatic. At a time when many young people are told that opportunities are shrinking and public life is becoming angrier, exchange tells them something different: the world is larger than the problem in front of them.

Je voudrais d'abord remercier très chaleureusement Kea Hoppe pour son invitation. Je suis particulièrement heureux que cette rencontre ait lieu à Paris. Parler ici, en ce moment, d'échange, de conversation et de compréhension mutuelle a une résonance particulière, précisément parce que ce ne sont pas toujours les images que nous voyons autour de nous.

Dear friends,

I should begin with my own experience, because I was asked to speak from it. Some years ago, my family and I left Spain and moved for four years to Latin America, to a country and a culture very different from our own. It was not simply a professional move. It changed the way we looked at the world.

You discover quickly that many things you considered normal are only normal in your own environment. Other societies solve problems, organize relationships, argue, and work differently. That creates something valuable: intellectual humility. You begin to distinguish between what is truly universal and what is merely familiar.

I can see the effect especially clearly in my daughter. She came with us when she was a teenager. Today, she has perhaps the most naturally international outlook in our family: a broader understanding of the world, an instinctive ability to understand people of her generation from different backgrounds, and very little sense that national borders should also be mental borders. Living abroad during your formative years does not simply give you memories. It enlarges the map of what you consider possible.

That is why studying abroad should be understood as an investment. It is an investment in human capital: languages, adaptability, independence, confidence, judgment. But also in civic and social capital. You learn to enter a community in which you are not at the center, to listen before assuming, to negotiate differences, and to understand that cooperation does not require uniformity.

And these are business skills too. Commerce depends on more than prices and contracts. It depends on trust, context, curiosity, and the willingness to deal with people you do not know and may never know. That is, after all, the essence of business: discovering the needs of people you do not know, and trying to satisfy them.

Nick Szabo coined a useful expression: "mental transaction costs." Cross-border life has them too: unfamiliarity, stereotypes, suspicion, fear of the unknown. Intercultural exchange reduces those costs. When another country is no longer an abstraction because you have lived or studied there, psychological distance becomes smaller. And when mental distance becomes smaller, exchanges of goods, people, ideas, capital, technology, and investment become easier.

This brings me to Karl Popper and to an idea he made central to modern political thought: the open society.

For Popper, an open society is not simply a society with elections. It is one in which individuals are free to question, criticize, experiment, make choices, and learn from mistakes. It is the opposite of a society organized around a single collective truth, a closed identity, or a predetermined historical destiny.

And you understand the open society differently once you have experienced openness. If you have studied or lived abroad, foreign societies are no longer intellectually distant. Difference becomes normal rather than threatening. You know that another way of life may be different without being hostile, and that another language, religion, custom, or political tradition does not make cooperation impossible.

The opposite impulse is always present: the temptation to close the circle and trust only what is near, familiar, and ours.

This is why I want to say something explicitly about nationalism. I distinguish between patriotism and nationalism. Loving your country, its history, language, and traditions is perfectly compatible with an open society. But nationalism can do something paradoxical: in the name of protecting a nation, it can reduce the horizon of its people and make their possible world smaller.

If you teach a young person that the important opportunities, ideas, and relationships are those inside a national circle, you may think you are giving roots. But you may also be building walls around the future. Exchange does the opposite. It does not make you less Spanish, French, German, British, Polish, Finnish, or American. It makes the world in which you can act much larger.

In Spain, it is often said that you are from the place where you did your bachillerato - roughly, your high-school years. There is something true in that. Those are the years when your mental map is being drawn. If you spend them in more than one place, perhaps you become, in a sense, from more than one place. Your identity does not disappear. It acquires additional dimensions.

This may become even more important in the age of artificial intelligence. Information is becoming abundant, translation almost instantaneous, technical knowledge increasingly accessible. But judgment, curiosity, adaptability, trust, perspective, and the ability to operate across different human contexts will remain scarce. The experience of being the foreigner - of having to understand before being understood - may become more valuable, not less.

And there is another benefit: exchange can be a kind of vaccine against polarization.

I use the word vaccine deliberately. It does not mean that you will never be exposed to a virus; it means you are better prepared to resist it. Polarization often works by reducing people to identities: us and them, native and foreigner, left and right, one generation or nation against another. It makes the other person an abstraction.

Exchange gives the abstraction a face.

Once you have lived in another society, once the foreigner has been your classmate, host family, colleague, or friend, sweeping generalizations about whole populations become less convincing. You can still disagree - sometimes strongly. But disagreement no longer requires dehumanization. In that sense, exchange can make us more peaceful and more democratic: not because it teaches a doctrine, but because it makes difference normal.

Europe offers an extraordinary historical example. Since the Second World War, Western European countries have progressively opened borders, universities, markets, companies, and societies to one another. Europe itself has not been free of war - tragically, we know that. But the major Western European countries that fought one another repeatedly for centuries have not gone to war against one another since 1945.

And we have not become less French, Spanish, German, or British. National cultures did not vanish. What changed was the horizon. Millions of Europeans studied, traveled, traded, invested, worked, and made friends across borders. Exchange programs cannot claim the credit for European peace. But they belong to the culture of openness that made the old way of thinking about neighbors increasingly difficult to sustain.

Johan Norberg, a Swedish writer and filmmaker whom I strongly recommend - his videos are excellent, and he explains complicated ideas very clearly - has written a wonderful book called Open. He summarizes the idea beautifully: "Openness created the modern world and propels it forwards ... the open society can never be finished. It is always a work in progress."

That is why openness requires institutions, habits, and experiences that renew it in every generation. No generation inherits an open society automatically. Every generation can be tempted by the tribe, by fear, by zero-sum thinking, by the promise that closing ourselves off will make us safer.

So perhaps the strategic value of youth exchange is larger than we sometimes say. Young people do not only learn about other countries. They learn that the world is available to them; that difference can be interesting rather than dangerous; that trust can cross borders; and that identity does not have to be a prison.

For seventy-five years, YFU has been doing something more important than moving students across borders. It has been moving borders inside people's minds.

If I may slightly expand the subtitle of today's symposium, intercultural exchange is indeed part of our democratic infrastructure. But I would add: it is also infrastructure for freedom.

Because a free society ultimately depends on people who are not afraid of an open world.

Thank you.