

Report from a Developing Nation

I know exactly what my students were thinking during each class session: «How come this guy is teaching in English when it is clear that he actually can speak German – is he trying to torture us?» Okay, maybe they thought I was just a bit odd, but let me tell you, whenever I tried to have a serious conversation in German, I did sound like a five-year old who is trying to pronounce complicated words such as «Bundesgerichtshofunterlassungsentscheidung». In any case, I hereby apologize to all those students who really hated to be taught in English. I also would like to apologize to my colleagues, who had to put up with my often horrendous mix of German and English language-bits. To be honest, though, I don't feel that guilty. That's because I know that my Danish friend, Claes de Vreese, who was a guest professor about a year ago, also used English in his classes. Thus, I'm not the first to stress my students with a foreign language. And compared to Claes's rapid-fire English, which always seems to be fueled by at least three double espressos, I think I did pretty well. The problem I now have is that my wife doesn't want to leave Switzerland anymore. That might be partially due to the fact that we will move to Bloomington, Indiana in early 2009. For those who are not familiar with the great state of Indiana, let's just say that it is not known to be a very happening place. I'm pretty sure, though, that she has secretly embraced the Swiss lifestyle of eating a lot of good chocolate and generally looking extremely relaxed. She also loves the fact that there is an Asian food store on every corner of this city and that nobody stares at her (she is Asian) – which happens frequently in Northern Germany, where my mom lives. It won't be easy to get the Swissness out of her again. But she is not the only one who doesn't want to leave. I came to Switzerland to see what it would be like to teach in a German-speaking environment. After 20 years in the United States (interrupted by stints in Hong Kong, Singapore and Malaysia), I really didn't think that I could ever live and teach in Europe again. Especially the academic system in Germany seemed self-centered and, well, very German («Herr Professor Doktor»). In fact, the thought of becoming a «Beamter auf Lebenszeit» sounded more like a threat than something I would want for me and my family. In short, I thought that I'd rather live in a country that has drivethroughchurches than to become one of those professors who serve the «VastMachine».

So yes, coming to Switzerland was the best decision I've made in a long time. I really, really enjoyed being here. I've been a guest professor before, but never have I felt that welcome and integrated. True, guest professors work hard for all the «Stutz» they get here (Swiss professors have the highest salaries in the world), but teaching at IPMZ has been fun. I was positively surprised by how willing students were to engage with an unknown professor and by how interested many of them seem to be in American politics.

To me, the best part of being a guest professor is the ability to meet students with different cultural perspectives – and Swiss students were especially interesting because of their cultural diversity. I wasn't able to get them to talk to me about the Swiss-German «thing» (even though I assured them that I'm more American than German by now), but I learned quite a bit from them about Switzerland and its people. Thanks to all those who talked to me during the past five months.

Another reason for my reluctant departure is the people at IPMZ. Everybody has been extremely nice and never made me feel like a temporary guest worker. By working closely with Frank's «Abteilung VI», I learned quite a bit about the day-to-day operations of Swiss academia. While I am not a big fan of the sub-departments within IPMZ, which seem to split the faculty unnecessarily into various subfields, I have been very impressed by the quality of the faculty and the push for good research. Given the seemingly unlimited resources that are available to academics at the University of Zürich, it is obvious that IPMZ has the potential to become a leading center for media research in Europe. Going back to the United States will feel like returning to a less developed country. I will walk less, drive more, eat crappy yogurts, fill large trash cans rather than a tiny Züri-Sack, never take trains, have a small office without a window, and teach students who don't really care where Europe or Asia really are. On the other hand, I will return to a country that just elected its first African-American president, hopefully ending W's reckless demolition of everything good America stands for (I'm writing this one week before the election – if Obama doesn't win you'll have to take me back!). So there is hope that my adopted home country will one day become a bit more like Switzerland.

I have about two more months to go, but I already know that I will miss my friends at IPMZ, especially those in «Abteilung VI» I will miss Frank, who works when other people sleep, Thomas, who never understood my jokes (my wife says that's because only I think they are funny), Angie, who really hates Germans who make fun of Germans, Bernd, whose indisputable authority regarding the latest retro-fashion made me burn my white sneakers, Annette, who knows where to get the best sausages in town, Kate, whose cheerful sarcasm often made my day, and all the other people at IPMZ who made my stay in Zürich such a great one.

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