CHAPTER 7

The Fulbright Program in the Netherlands: An Example of Science Diplomacy

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Educational exchange continues to be a matter of importance for the United States. At his first speaking engagement as US Secretary of State in February 2013, John Kerry quoted William J. Fulbright, initiator of the famous international educational exchange program: “Senator Fulbright [...] knew that the value of sharing our proudest values bore fruit in the long run [...]. ‘Having people who understand your thought [...] is much greater security than another submarine’.” The Program was initiated by Senator William J. Fulbright for several reasons: to reduce international tensions and promote peace through international understanding; to extend US influence abroad, and enable Americans to better understand other nations (and their own place in the world); to inform future leaders about and orientate them on the United States; and finally to generate public-private cooperation in furthering these goals. This chapter investigates the role and influence of the Fulbright Program, the principal mechanism for promoting educational interchange into and out of the United States, with a focus on the Netherlands in the period between 1949 and 1980. It concentrates on the impact of the Program across all academic disciplines, but with special attention for the hard sciences.

The Program was a flexible tool that could be adjusted to meet the needs of both the American and Dutch governments. Particular institutions—most notably the Dutch Foundation for Fundamental Research of Matter (FOM)—were able to make use of the Fulbright Program’s benefits to further their specific agendas in promoting scientific research in the Netherlands. Fulbright became a prime mechanism for making ideas travel, and this required individuals to carry ideas: as Robert Oppenheimer commented, “perhaps the best way to send knowledge is to wrap it up in a person.”


The Fulbright Program has long been presented in the guise of US ‘benevolent globalism.’ The sale of surplus war materials and the channeling of their proceeds into funding international educational exchange has been put forward as the epitome of enlightened superpower leadership since its inception. Randall Woods described this approach as “an integral part of the internationalist movement that swept America during and after World War II,” and according to him, the Program expressed a “mission […] to make the world safe for diversity.” Yet, these insights have not been applied to in-depth research on the Program’s impact. A recent study on the origins of US public diplomacy during and after WWII refers only in passing to the merit of the Fulbright Program for a “mutual exchange of ideas.” The only book-length study of the Program dates from 1965, followed by several collections of alumni reminiscences and historical essays. Finally, scholars examining the expansion of the US culture and information campaigns during the Cold War have tended to subsume Fulbright under this broader ideological offensive too easily, losing sight of its unique aspects and operational mentality.

Historians are now re-examining the Program’s origins, interpreting it in the frame of ‘nationalist globalism’ as opposed to the dominant discourse of either benevolent hegemony or its critique, cultural imperialism. Studies on individual countries, which follow the practice of the Program closely in particular cultural and political settings, are now breaking new ground to question its ‘apolitical’ status and highlight the long-term impact of the relationships that have been built up over time. So far Australia, Austria, Benin, China, and Spain have been covered, either entirely or in part. In the late 1990s, the late