

The world outside

My first real encounter with the world outside the United States came in 1962, when I spent several months working for an anti-government newspaper in South Africa [...] The battle against apartheid was my first exposure to serious politics, and to a nineteen-year-old, as I was then, it was overwhelming. Part of the experience was realizing that the USA was on the wrong side. Fine speeches at the United Nations were one thing, but the directory board in the lobby of the American Embassy in Pretoria, with its long list of military attachés, told a different story. [...] Learning something of the cooperation between the USA and the white regime in South Africa [...] was my first lesson that America was not always the noble force for freedom I wanted it to be. A few years afterwards, the Vietnam War underlined that lesson, for me and for millions of other Americans of my generation.

Later encounters with the rest of the world have underlined it in different ways. Despite President Bush's cowboy foray¹ into Iraq, the way most nations experience American might these days is not military, but economic. Time abroad is always an education. I had not thought much about globalization until my wife and I lived for six months in India in the late 1990s. To read even India's mainstream² newspapers was a revelation. Indians were outraged by American corporate attempts to patent³ basmati rice and a medicinal extract of the neem tree⁴, products that Indians had been using for centuries. [...] To travel anywhere these days with open eyes is to see a world dominated by an increasingly arrogant superpower. When it comes to a different kind of international agreement, those of which the human race has reason to be proud, the United States has refused to sign almost all of them: the treaty establishing the International Criminal Court, the ban on landmines, the Kyoto accords on global warming and many, many others. [...]

And yet, another type of image appears in the mirror the world holds up to Americans. [...] From the classes I've taught and experienced abroad, I've come to understand why hundreds of thousands of people from all over the world scrape together⁵ the money to study in the United States. [...] Sure, many come to the United States simply for an American degree, which is often a ticket to a good job. But education systems always reflect the larger society, and if the arrogance of American military and economic power reflects the worst about us, our schools and colleges, at their best, reflect something more hopeful. What that is, I think, is more than just the tradition of free speech - something Americans did not invent, after all, and which, happily, we have no monopoly on. Rather it is a marked indifference to rank and hierarchy. [...] We may not be economically equal, but we assume a kind of social equality with others, and it is this, I think, which lies at the bottom of much of what I love about American life, from the liveliness of its classrooms to the inventiveness that continues to shape the Internet, to the thousands of civic organizations whose progenitors⁶ taught the eye of Alexis de Tocqueville more than a century and a half ago. [...]

This, to me, is the paradox: that what is, at home, perhaps the most vibrant civil society on earth is, abroad, a trigger-happy⁷ superpower of terrifying arrogance. If there is a single hope I have for my country it is that the great promise of the one can begin to rescue us from the great dangers of the other.

Adam HOCHSCHILD, in *OverThere: How America Sees the World (2005)*

1- incursion, raid – 2- ici, à grand tirage – 3- faire breveter – 4- neem : arbre indien – 5- économiser avec peine – 6- ancêtres – 7- qui a la gâchette facile, va-t-en-guerre