

Life is White Noise

When people ask me how I ended up in Odessa, Ukraine, this year or why I am working for the Open Society Institute, my training in rigorous economics makes me want to answer that it was a random error, an unexpected occurrence, or stochastic, “white,” noise. I have no scientific explanation for why I am here and it does not seem to matter whether the question is specific or general. Instead, all I have is utilitarian logic to hold on to in times like these because all I can answer ultimately is that I like my work without really knowing completely why.

After I graduated from Queen’s University with a major in economics in 1996, I moved to Edmonton, Alberta, where I studied for my MA. My main interests at that time were in economic history and looking for the sources of economic prosperity – why some regions are richer than others. As I continued reading I began to focus on the new literature in institutional change and the role of the state in the economy. Too many debates in the 1990s spent a lot of time on the size of the state rather than the impact the form of the government would have on social well-being. The obvious places in the world where questions like the ones I had were being tested and asked were all in former Communist countries where there was a renewed interest in questions about exactly what the state is for, and for what it is not. I had a long time interest in Russia and the USSR and it all seemed to fit together. After working and researching in the U of A for one year after my MA program, I accepted a fellowship with the Civic Education Project to move to Uzbekistan. This humanitarian NGO is dedicated to promoting long term democratic development in the former Soviet Union by promoting skills in the classroom that students will need in order to actively participate in their democracies after graduating, such as weighing evidence and logic, constructing arguments, peacefully agreeing to disagree, and questioning policies. All of these skills are learned rather than being innate. In addition to lecturing in economics and researching topics on the region, I also devoted a lot of time to studying methods for improving interaction with students and colleagues in the university system and advocating reforms that would help promote these types of goals. I originally planned to do this for one year, but somewhere along the way I found myself constantly deciding to stay in the region.

Probably one of the most thought provoking reasons why I decided to stay in the former USSR for more than one year had to do with my rational expectations, or lack thereof. Before I moved to Tashkent, Uzbekistan, I had read information about Muslim cultures, the Soviet Union, crime, corruption, and mostly many other negative aspects of the region. I expected to see, therefore, poverty, run down buildings, a lack of new textbooks, be asked questions by the police, perhaps be robbed, and experience some living conditions harsher than what I experienced in the west (for example, I wash my clothes by hand in a bucket). All of these things happened, but it was really all of the experiences I had that I could not have read about nor expected and for which I had absolutely no explanation. I did not expect to see government bureaucrats, especially former Soviet ones, who were dedicated to promoting universal access and had serious rationales for the way society operated. I did not expect to see an incredibly efficient and comfortable train system, wide access to the arts and operas, beautiful parks, beer-

gardens, well designed road systems and a very high degree of warmth and hospitality everywhere I went as well as a very peaceful liberal society where anyone can feel free to dress however they please. I did not expect to fall in love with buying my groceries in bazaars where fruits and vegetables are of a quality I have never experienced elsewhere before. Many students also spoke English with so little practical experience, which says a lot for the educational system. Actually, after coming here, and given the catastrophe of dissolution, I am constantly impressed that the situation is not worse.

After my first year in Tashkent, Uzbekistan, I accepted positions in Southern Siberia (Petropavlovsk, Kazakhstan), Bishkek (Kyrgyzstan) and Kharkov (Ukraine). In 2002 I returned to Nova Scotia where I accepted a position in St FX and later SMU. While I was away I had maintained contact with a growing progressive political movement in the local PC party of the province which was elected to power in 1999 – the Red Tory movement. While in Canada I was surprised by how my views had changed and how much reform was needed. In 2002 I considered running for Parliament after being nominated to run for the candidacy of the Halifax branch of the New Conservative Party, but decided not to run. Instead, I accepted a position to return to the former USSR and have moved to Odessa, Ukraine, to continue my work on higher educational reform, lecturing and researching in economics. I do not know what exactly the future will bring, but my best guess is that I will hopefully be granted enough funding to finally complete my PhD and currently I have an offer of admission to study in the University of New Mexico where there is a lot of research being conducted on the former USSR. I suspect if I manage to receive the degree, my plan is to return to Eastern Europe or the former USSR more permanently.

After graduating from Queen's I lost touch with most of my classmates, and I can be contacted at barrie_hebb@rambler.ru and I have a website at www.barrieinussr.blogspot.com. All are welcome to visit the site, but preferably stop by in person.