

My Mobility

Students from Ca' Foscari Recount their Learning Experiences Abroad

Mirrors

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Emilia Esin reflects on national identity, nationalism and racism – and how taking part in an Erasmus programme can help overcome apathy.

The desire to see this land had long since reached maturity.
Johann Wolfgang Goethe, talking about his travel to Italy

Before applying to the Erasmus Mundus programme, I always thought that at some point I would leave my country to work and live abroad. Not because I did not love Italy, but because I never felt a strong sense of belonging to our national identity and I always defined myself as a citizen of the world. Taking part in an Erasmus programme means meeting a lot of people from different countries – this is especially true when it comes to Erasmus Mundus programmes, in which participants come from all over the world. It was in this context that I realised that no one can build their own identity without comparing themselves with people who are different from them. In other words, you cannot understand who you truly are, without getting to know the others.

As for me, I never understood how much I felt Italian, until I had to talk about my country. It is hard for me to find one specific situation in which I had this sensation, especially because my Erasmus lasted two years and I travelled more than one country – Spain, Tunisia and France. But I know for sure that it happened when I found myself explaining how my family celebrates our successes with a fine meal, or how we welcome home someone who was away for a long time with a feast, or how we celebrate literally any important event with food – it was then that I understood that our perception of food as a ritual was not shared by many of my colleagues, and that it was rather something that I had in common with other Italians and with North Africans. It was when I was talking about German guilt with my friend from Berlin and she told me – No one is proud of being German –, that I looked at myself and discovered that I was proud of being Italian, despite all the horrors of the Second World War. It also happened when I found myself smiling as I discovered how many words are shared

by the Italian and the Tunisian languages. It was while speaking to my Brazilian colleagues about colonisation and the history of their country, that I realised I knew almost nothing about South America, while I found myself passionate about Italy when I was asked to talk about the history of my country. I never expected that.

Unfortunately, we are witnessing a spreading of hatred and racism all over Europe - not a country is spared. We tend to be less empathic and more suspicious, to feel unsafe and therefore to be more introvert and withdrawn. Taking part in an Erasmus Mundus programme can break this *apathy*. Going and living abroad for a certain period of time means becoming a foreigner yourself, even if temporarily, and the feeling of being 'the other' is likely to make you more indulgent towards foreigners in your own country - I will never forget the first time I was told that my French was not good and, even if I tried hard, it was clear that I had difficulties in communicating. Moreover, knowing precisely and serenely who you are prevents you from perceiving as a threat the ones who come from the outside.

Taking part in an Erasmus programme means travelling, moving to a new country and facing a different reality. Going home after an Erasmus programme means having a better knowledge of yourself and, at the same time, being hungry for travelling, for learning more about other people's way of living and for understanding life.