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# Beyond Trumpism: The Underlying U.S. Political Climate for International Students and Scholars

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**T**he current political climate is changing the outlook for international students and scholars in the United States. With federal proposals to limit international students in the country, reports of discrimination, and xenophobia fears, the United States may be perceived as a less welcoming site for students and scholars from abroad. While university efforts to combat these negative views are important, there are limited theoretical reflections on the basic assumptions and contradictions surrounding international students and scholars that shape public perceptions, practices, and policies. Based on the key concepts of neoracism and territoriality, a society's primary identification with the nation-state and America-first interests make internationalization not only difficult, but also positions international students and scholars as threatening to the social order and as convenient scapegoats to governmental shortcomings. These sentiments have pervaded the international higher education landscape. After reflecting on these circumstances and resulting challenges, the article concludes with suggestions for transcending such mental barriers and addressing current challenges in more thoughtful and effective ways.

## U.S. POLITICAL CLIMATE

Last year, a NAFSA survey identified the “political climate” as a leading concern for international enrollment management (Redden 2018) while numerous scholars directly suggested Trumpism as a reason for the shifting of international student flows away from the United States (e.g., De Wit and Altbach 2018; Lee 2017). Since 2017, President Donald Trump has continued to propose anti-immigration policies that reflect the worsening political climate for current and future international students and scholars in U.S. higher education. Among the most recent travel ban attempts was to limit Chinese students in the United States out of a fear that they are spies (Yoon-Hendricks 2018). Currently, nationals from seven countries are restricted from U.S. travel, as decided by the U.S. Supreme Court in June 2018 (U.S. Department of State 2018). Undoubtedly, such travel policies will curb international students and scholars from affected countries from attending U.S. institutions, thereby limiting the countries from which those in the United States originate.

The benefits that international students and scholars offer are hardly disputed by higher education leaders and need not be retold here. Universities and higher education groups have openly expressed their concerns about President Trump's proposals to limit international students and scholars in the United States, knowing the potential repercussions of hosting fewer of them (Redden 2017). What is just as concerning is the collateral damage these successful, as well as failed, policy attempts leave behind.

Meanwhile, current international students and scholars may be at risk. The FBI revealed that the threat of white nationalist violence in the United States is at least as big a threat as that posed by the Islamic State (ISIS) and similar groups (Williams 2017). The disclosure is concerning because it suggests that migrants and temporary residents who are already in the United States may be targets of immigrant hate groups. These dangers are compounded by the more subtle forms of xenophobia that appear less frequently in the news despite their prevalence.

## NEORACISM

Xenophobia and neoracism remain major obstacles in internationalizing universities, perhaps even greater in the current political climate. Neoracism is the subordination of people of color in the postcolonial era on the basis of culture, masking traditional racism (Lee and Rice 2007) and xenophobia. Neoracism is more subtly justified as a way to maintain cultural preservation and global ordering. Under this mindset, international students, as suggested by recent legislative attempts, become misrepresented as threats to the nation-state. More specifically, neoracism presumes a world order that welcomes groups from some countries (e.g., the United Kingdom, Canada, and Germany) more than others (e.g., Iran, China, and Somalia). The U.S. border, like almost every national border in the world, is selectively permeable, depending on one's nationality. An embracing of internationalization holistically might ignore the very unequal patterns of global access, particularly for lower income countries in the Global South that also tend not to be predominantly white. Border discrimination is real and yet the internationalization rhetoric presumes a global mythscape of free movement as a universal pastime rather than a privileged reality.

Identifying mistreatment is not enough. Addressing deep-seated prejudice requires a fuller understanding of how and where cultural superiority and discrimination originates. While overt neoracism is easier to detect and condemn, its subtler forms arise from nationalism, or a sense of superiority based on national identity. In function, nationalism privileges members of a given country while subjugating the purpose of those belonging to other cultural groups to serve the core's interests. Economic rationales are the most pervasive justifications to retain international students and scholars in the United States. The common stereotype of international students as "cash cows," for instance, is not only dehumanizing, it also supposes that their only function is to offset the rising costs of university operations for domestic students.

Beyond offering practical suggestions to provide a more welcoming climate for all international students and scholars (e.g., #YouAreWelcomeHere, buddy programs, and cultural celebrations) that are already being implemented in many institutions, more work is necessary to better understand the climate that perpetuates neoracism in the classrooms, among peers, and off campus (Lee and Rice 2007; Lee and Cantwell

2012). Visible gestures of support are insufficient in combating deep-seated prejudice that negatively invades college environments. Internationalization activities and neoracism can coexist. Hosting international students and scholars and mistreating them, for example, are not always at odds, but rather, can happen simultaneously. As another example, a university might be one of the nation's largest international hosts, but also provide inadequate support services compared to those given to the domestic student population. Thus, internationalization must be more than observable activities, but be a more deeply engrained consciousness about the humanity of internationalization with special attention to the most marginalized international students and scholars.

## TERRITORIALITY

Embedded in an unwelcoming climate for some international students and scholars, whether in small social groups or large institutional settings, is a sense of territory that predetermines who is a member or not. Territory is most often defined by national borders. Individuals within that territory then share a social identity around common citizenship. By privileging citizenship, which is an expression of territoriality, the state's exclusive authority over its territory (Sassen 2013), noncitizens are reduced to second-class members with fewer rights and access to public resources. International students often pay the highest price (in regard to full tuition fees without financial aid) but may utilize campus resources the least. Career services and internship opportunities, as examples, might favor local residents (Li and Lee 2018). University support services staff might wrongly assume that international students do not need assistance or are not "at risk," favoring a limited demographic of local citizens. In other cases, nativist fears of immigrants taking away what "belongs" to a territory's citizens might serve as underlying justification for not supporting these visitors or worse, mistreating them.

## HOW MIGHT INTERNATIONAL HIGHER EDUCATION TRANSCEND NEORACISM AND TERRITORIALITY?

Global realities are fast changing. As nation-states seek to maintain their significance in globalization and appeal to populist agendas, internationalization is repositioned as a threat. Rather than retreating to old international paradigms of one nation to another,

which assumes a basic push-pull involving the individual or institution weighing their subjective costs and benefits, we must reflect more openly about the paradigms through which international education is understood and operates. Rather than simply denying, working within, or combating an unwelcoming climate and neoracism against international students and scholars, we must critically examine the social forces that create and facilitate it, while keeping the following sentiments in mind:

1. Program evaluations and university reporting help identify issues, but do not inherently address them. Internationalization is not a value, but a strategy. Values about internationalization can differ widely (e.g., revenue generation, prestige, diplomacy, etc.) leading to disconnected and conflicting efforts. What are the university's varying and underlying assumptions about internationalization? Internationalization leaders and staff should engage in honest reflections and intentional learning in which taken-for-granted assumptions regarding citizenship, territory, territoriality, and privilege are critically questioned and shared.
2. Internationalization tends to essentialize nation-states as homogenous territories with a single border. By decentering territory as solely for the nation-state, we can better recognize the global reality of student flows as a networked border with particular channels based on demand, income, and political relations. In so doing, "international" should de-emphasize the "national" and make more central diverse cultures, including those within a single country.
3. Internationalization is becoming increasingly transnational, with education moving beyond binary partnerships and exchanges. Likewise, international students and scholars will increasingly represent more than one country or cultural perspective. Students are not simply international but transnational, with multiple experiences from multiple locations.
4. One of the biggest blind spots with international research is that by centering the work on nation-states we essentialize social identities to the country, while ignoring the many borders within them. There is no typical Chinese

student, for example, much like there is no typical U.S. student. The diversity of students from the same country should be valued and recognized, much like the diversity of students from the United States.

5. International students and scholars are more than resources to support national agendas and their host citizens. They are extensions of the global network that deborder territories. Domestic students and scholars can also serve as part of this international network based on their education and experiences abroad. Rather than relying on old "us versus them" or "national versus international" categories, we must re-envision universities as transnational institutions that serve as conduits for cross-cultural discovery, learning, and exchange.

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