

The Salzburg Seminar on American Civilization 1947

(Report by Margaret Mead to the Harvard Student Council)

The Salzburg Seminar in American Civilization

The Salzburg Seminar in American Civilization, conducted under the auspices of the Harvard Student Council and the International Student Service, in the Leopoldskron, Salzburg, Austria, during the summer of 1947, presented many unique features in cross national education, in Euro -American relations, in cross national communication, and in problems of group living and group organization. This report is presented from a double standpoint. As an anthropologist accustomed to the observation of group behavior, I can compare this experiment with other group situations in which I have been a participant who was also making systematic observations. * As the lecturer in charge of those students who wished to get some familiarity with modern social science methods in a field loosely labeled "sociology", I taught a seminar in which the students undertook to do small pieces of field work, interviewing and observing their fellow students so as to add to the chronicle of the seminar, and contribute at stated intervals - to the staff's awareness of problems and possibilities in the ongoing group progress. I have used these students' observations in preparing this report.

The Salzburg Seminar is conspicuous for the number of obstacles which the organizing group had to overcome. The plan was conceived late in the year, and the organizing committee of students were confronted with the following problems:

- (1) to find a site for the seminar,
- (2) to raise funds to finance the seminar,
- (3) to recruit a faculty whose services would of necessity have to be voluntary,
- (4) to find students for the seminar in all the European countries from whom it was hoped that students would come,
- (5) to obtain permission and transportation for these students, and
- (6) to organize the operation of the seminar in the site selected, including getting books there, arranging for transportation and currency problems, importing food, and assembling a local staff.

This series of tasks had the peculiarity that all of the first five appeared to be so interdependent that it was exceedingly difficult to complete any one of them without the others. That the seminar ever took place may be in large part attributed to the willingness of the organizing committees to take risks and their refusal to be deterred by contingent conditions. To maintain morale, recruit faculty, plan to recruit students and raise funds would have been difficult enough under any circumstances. In this case, however, there was the additional difficulty that the organizing committee were trying an experiment, designed in hope and faith, for which there were no precedents and about which they were necessarily unsure themselves. That the Seminar ever took place must be attributed to the way in which the organizing committee were able to take the continuous risk of

* Wellesley School of Community Affairs, 1944, Vassar Summer Institute in Community Living, 1945, Unesco Seminar in International Understanding at Sevres, 1947, etc.

failure, even in the face of their own uncertainty over the untried plan, as they built up one necessary condition after another for the Seminar's ultimate success.

After surmounting the initial difficulties of no faculty without assurance of funds to run the Seminar and no funds without assurance of the faculty, the next bottle neck was the question of recruiting and selecting of students which it had been originally planned to handle through the good offices of the International Student Service whose staff however found it impossible to add this task to their other duties, so that the organizing committee was faced as late as June with a task of finding suitable students. Two members of the Committee flew all over Europe, visiting France, England, Belgium, Holland, Denmark, Sweden, Czechoslovakia, Poland, and Switzerland, and in the course of two weeks sought out and interviewed about 150 students. The caliber of the European students themselves was heavily tried in the ensuing weeks in the struggle they had to get across borders from one European country to another. The fact that 92 finally arrived still seemed, at the end of the Seminar, to be a miracle. The site also proved a difficulty, and some members of the Faculty agreed to go to teach in one castle and in the end found themselves teaching in quite a different one. The castle itself, Leopoldskron, had been bombed and required extensive rehabilitation, in a country where such materials as window glass were virtually unobtainable. The decision of the organizing group to import their own food and neither strain the local food situation, nor rely, except in extreme emergencies, on the army, also meant extensive organizational work. It may be added that the seminar stayed within its small budget of \$23,000 out of which they financed the initial expenses of the European students, some traveling expenses for the American group and the expense of conducting the Seminar. All the members of the American groups, faculty, assistants and student administrators contributed their services at Salzburg.

The Setting

The final choice of Leopoldskron as the site had very important implications for the success of the Seminar and for some of the alternative choices which arose during the summer. Under Max Reinhardt, the Leopoldskron had been carefully preserved as a period spot; the spacious rooms, the formal gardens, the terrace by the lake, presented a consistent stage set, an articulate architectural backdrop for a way of life devoted to the arts. In this setting students arriving to meet other students from the countries of their former enemies, students who had fought on opposite sides, students who had been active in the underground, were able to meet in a mood which combined a sense of distance from real life, and a sense of the importance of the traditions of civilization. From a Europe where no one will ever live again the kind of life for which the Leopoldskron is an appropriate setting, the European students walked, as it were, upon a stage¹ where some of the more insistent difficulties of their real life situation could be forgotten. The first shock as they found themselves sitting side by side with men whom two short years ago they might have killed, was softened as they saw themselves reflected back, in the dim lights, from the great mirrors. This gave them time to pause, to hesitate, to see themselves with a certain degree of detachment. Throughout the Seminar, the loveliness and unreality of the setting consistently muted stridencies which might have developed. It was least helpful, perhaps to some of the younger Americans, who, having faced less devastation of their own values at home, were less in need of blurred and archaic lines within which to meet those who had destroyed them. Coming from a culture which in its early days had distrusted graven images, the lush over-decoration of the castle, and the relationship between the style of the castle and the style of the festivals, was to some of the Americans, somewhat suspect. It may perhaps safely be said that

¹ As my seven-year-old child remarked after asking why English was the language of the Seminar, "But after all, I suppose, it is the language of the producers."

Leopoldskron represented one pole of possible choice, the other would have been Spartan living with nature and extremely highly pitched political ideals, an atmosphere in which some of the younger Americans and some of the Northern Europeans might have been happier, but in which it would have been impossible to blend successfully Europeans with so many different political and religious biases. Furthermore, it is doubtful whether a setting less explicitly European, would have made it possible for the European students to absorb concomitantly a respect for American culture and an understanding of American behavior. In the overcrowded living conditions, the more specific American details such as three meals a day with such an early supper were felt as uncongenial by the Europeans. But when the young Americans turned the terrace into a "front porch", working and lounging and sun bathing beside the quiet lake, the difference in their style of human relations was brought home to the Europeans in an acute and appreciable form, and as one student wrote: "Perhaps Salzburg Seminar has on its own way given us Europeans a good and welcome learning; during this Seminar we have seen how easily and comfortably an American student always looks to behave and yet in a moment he is ready for most ardent and distinguished conversation-fight when needed. It is, he has learned the right way to relax."

The relationship to the festivals and to the other aspects of Salzburg cultural life provided just the necessary extension into an outer world which kept Leopoldskron life from becoming too intense and concentrated, and was probably partly responsible for the lack of friction among students many of whom were unused to working and living at such close quarters. It provided a balance between shared experiences which made closer human relations possible, and differing experiences, which preserved a sense of freshness in the group. That the Seminar members in the end expressed a strong desire for common events, dancing, singing, as a group, should not be interpreted as meaning that a program of intensive group activity would have improved the Seminar, but rather that the appreciation of the Seminar members of the group rose steadily through the six weeks. More planned group activity might very easily have produced friction or satiation. Furthermore Salzburg with its bombed areas, its American MP's, in large bright tin helmets, its DP camps and its Jewish refugees, its population among whom there was not a single plump child, although people did put rucksacks on their backs and go up into the mountains - pulling the Seminar members back to the real world and assuring them that Leopoldskron was not an escape but merely a setting within which it was possible to meet each other and breathe in new air for the months to come.

The Salzburg Seminar plan was a product of the sort of cross national thinking on which it will be necessary to rely in constructing a more closely knit and more mutually intelligible world. The initiating group, of American students and one Austrian-American graduate student, combined the expansiveness and willingness to give and to help, which is characteristic of American voluntary ventures in the international field, with an Austrian sense of a way in which the greatest cultural contribution could be made, and a familiarity with the setting of Salzburg and what that setting itself could contribute. There was a desire to do something non-material for European students, for the whole cause of human learning in Europe and the determination not to sponsor just another international conference where people talked aimlessly of good will. The organizing committee saw the needs of European students as need for renewing communication with each other, need for books, need for better living conditions and need for rest. In order to meet these needs a context had to be chosen in which communication could occur. If it were not to be another international good will conference with understanding placed at the center of the agenda, then there must be some content within which communication could take place. This seemed to suggest a common language. The natural sciences were inappropriate because there was no necessary relationship between being a good natural scientist and speaking any given language. The choice of American civilization developed out of this series of requirements, as a field

in which knowledge of English - in which the American group could provide a faculty - would be a functional requirement. The choice of Salzburg meant that the Seminar would be held in a country which had once been famous for a culture which regarded itself as European rather than narrowly Austrian, but in a community of Austria which had a markedly Nazi record, and was now occupied by the U.S. Army. Holding such a Seminar there was a way of saying to the European students: "We believe that there is a living tradition of European culture, we realize that central Europe with its recent Nazi tradition, and present critical economic and social conditions is a crucial spot in the whole question of European and world recovery." Thus the choice of Salzburg was both an expression of faith in the powers of recovery which still existed in Austria and an acceptance of a challenge from some of the worst conditions to be found in Europe. The choice of American civilization as the subject of a Seminar, to be held in a country which had recently been on the side of the enemy and which was still occupied by the American Army, also had several implications. To make American civilization a genuine area of communication meant that the Seminar has to be strictly disassociated from any government or propagandist venture and that the content had to be cultural, and relatively free from political controversy. This independence was maintained by raising the funds entirely from contributions, by importing food, and by a slightly formal and academic tone. Thus while there were lectures and seminars on American foreign policy, they were cast in a form to increase knowledge and understanding but not to set up ideological discussions among the European students. The fact that the European students were each permitted to pursue their separate ways without being pressed into any research plan was undoubtedly important also in preserving a sense of free devotion to learning without state interference.

Among the comments and requests collected from the students was included the request that there be American students included in a future Seminar. But had there been Americans as regular students at Salzburg this summer, American civilization would not have presented a meeting place in studying which the European students could forget their national differences. The decision to give the Seminar a formal academic tone with scheduled lectures without discussion, while somewhat against modern trends which emphasize more group participation in all parts of the learning process, served a useful purpose in differentiating the Seminar from the sort of vague "international conference" which it was desired to avoid. The success of the plan depended considerably on the fact that the faculty group and the student assistants contributed their services. If a group of similar standing had been paid - even by a most disinterested and selfless undergraduate body - it seems unlikely that in the current European atmosphere of state sponsored propaganda, the Europeans - students and Austrian general public - could not have believed that this was not a propagandist effort, designed to serve nationalistic ends. However, the voluntary character of the whole plan made it possible for the Seminar to offer an opportunity to students interested in America to study about America very much as a group of botanists or zoologists from the United States might have taken a laboratory of American flora or fauna to their fellow botanists or zoologists in Europe, with the simple statement, if this is something in which you are interested, why, we who are after all in a position to make it available for study, will be glad to do so. The Salzburg Seminar committee had course aims of importance to world peace which were more specific than would have been served by the study of American botany. The design of the Seminar was such as to increase understanding - by both the Europeans and the Americans - of those aspects of American life which would be most useful in increasing effective communications between America and Europe, and among Europeans.

The plan was therefore asymmetrical, a group of European students who came as guests, to study, and a group of Americans, faculty, assistants and student staff, who came to contribute their time and effort to the Seminar. This asymmetry has disadvantages. In the evaluation sessions and in the special interviewing done by the sociology seminar members, the European students expressed a wish that they had contributed more to the

Seminar in planning and work. While this expressed desire is in conformity with the best democratic practices, and while it will be desirable to enlist as much help as possible among the European students in future years, it is possible that for at least another year it would be better to let them make their contribution after the Seminar is over, and to preserve the essential symmetry in which the Americans remain in a rather dedicated role.

The Organization of the Seminar

The most unique feature of the Seminar was, of course, the youth of the administrators and the reversal of responsibility as between Harvard students and Harvard visiting faculty members. This plan seemed initially to strain even American capacities for democratic relationships between faculty and students but as it worked out, thanks primarily to the imagination and flexibility and sense of humor of the members of the Harvard faculty, it provided an almost unparalleled demonstration to the European students of some of the aspects of American democracy which are most difficult to communicate. When it was coupled with the other attitudes of the faculty, their willingness to be interrupted at any time, their unselfconscious treatment of the students as individuals and their participation in the ordinary living arrangements of the Seminar, it guaranteed that the European students would definitely experience some of those aspects of American culture which the best intentioned army of occupation is unfitted to convey.

In the same way the absence of explicit hierarchy among the administrative group, with its three secretaries, while exceedingly difficult for the group itself to operate, contributed very markedly to the success of the whole venture. The absence of a defined head made it much more difficult for conflicts to arise in those members who were at first uncertain as to their wholehearted participation in a group which included former enemies. Any call for explicit loyalty from a strongly identified head, or perhaps even from a well-defined American committee, would have made such conflicts sharper. The younger Americans perhaps benefited least from the lightly diffused organized leadership because in their very difficult position as subject and object both - they tended towards partisanship, and projection into the administrative group of their own mixed attitudes towards Europe, Austria and the Seminar. This sort of organization also made it possible for a group to develop loyalty without pitting themselves against other groups; it is possible that with more defined leadership the Seminar might have become a group which owed its solidarity not to a shared task and shared living, but to rivalrous competition or hostile attitudes to the town of Salzburg, or a nearby army barracks, or to some other outside group. With due allowance for the great strain which such unpatterned administration places on those who participate directly in it, this team pattern seems to have overwhelming advantages. Improvements could well come in breaking off more tasks - such as scheduling the lectures - and organizing them more efficiently, so that the necessary flexibility of a team leadership does not become translated into an overflexibility of schedules or transportation system.

The Faculty and Lecture Subjects

A series of happy accidents made it possible this summer to collect a faculty of exceptionally high caliber, perhaps we cannot hope again to repeat this good fortune. But it seems worthwhile to stress certain special and general characteristics of this faculty. It was very valuable that the faculty members were of such high standing that

they were confident and assured in handling their material, because the defensiveness and the tentativeness of lecturers of less standing might easily have seemed - to European listeners - to show a lack of pride and certainty about the American cultural heritage about which they were lecturing. It was valuable to have one member who was European in training and a recent American because he could translate, with extraordinary clarity, many unfamiliar aspects of the American scene which old Americans would have been more likely to take for granted and it was useful for the Europeans to examine their mixed feelings when he spoke of American ways of life and said "we" with an undeniably European accent. The range from the lectures on American literature where the very stuff of American life was communicated in a form which no sensitive student could fail to appreciate through the lectures on sociology and government where concrete materials were presented in frames of reference which were exceedingly unfamiliar to the students, to theoretical economics and economic history where the categories are cross national, was excellent in increasing the understanding of both American faculty and European students of the variety of lines along which Euro-American communication can flow. Personally I feel it is impossible to emphasize the importance to the Seminar of the lectures on American Literature because they communicated the sense of a living literature, and of a culture to which self-criticism is a necessary condition of life. In the area of communication between America and Europe, where we are still uncertain novices, the field of literature seems a reliable way to establish and maintain subtle and complex understandings which may later be subjected to greater analytical articulacy.

A quite different contribution was made by the work in sociology and government because they brought to Europeans a new sense of the concreteness and empiricism with which the social sciences in America have attacked the description and analysis of social phenomena.

What the European Participants Got Out of the Seminar

It seems impossible to state simply what the European students got from the Seminar. They came with very different needs - for stimulation, for information, for reassurance, for rest, for hope. They came with a most uneven knowledge of America, but with the exception of those who had been in the United States, with a very meager sense of what American civilization really was. They all learned something more of the complexity of American culture, and I think most of them learned, as counterpoint to an increasing sense of what American civilization was, that there was something which might be called European civilization, which was not merely an aggregate of national cultures, but an old shared tradition. Many of them said that they had learned most from the behavior of the large diversified American group in whose friendliness most national competitiveness and intranational competitiveness and sense of sharp distinctiveness of ideology and nationality melted away. In listening to the way in which Americans participated in discussions, maintaining their ground but not finding it necessary to withdraw from the conflict, or to beat down an opponent, many of them experienced, probably for the first time, the particular quality of a democratic tradition which valued the existence of differences of opinion.

If the Seminar is to be regarded as in any sense typical, it has demonstrated that one of the major contributions which Americans can make to Europe, is to give to the members of the different European nationalities a wider identification, a sense of their Europeaness. At the present time, Europe, as a civilization - rather than as a geographical area seems more real to Americans than to Europeans.

This means that Americans can do a great deal to help shape an emerging sense of European civilization, if, to a growing understanding of Europe, they add their physical participation in cultural ventures where the issues can be vividly experienced.

A careful study of the themes which recurred in separate interviews and in the evaluation section also gives clues to what the European students got. The major recommendation for another year was for more time to prepare, more time to read before they came. In other words they left the Seminar, unsated, and anxious for more. As a student paper said, "A great deal of them started this journey in that they ... would really during these short summer-weeks get a concentrated short cut about American cultural life in the whole ... but the time has been too short sorry to say ... they have at last sighed melancholy, and most of them pray God in their night dreams to give them this opportunity once again, so that they with more experience would really be able to use this precious time in the best manner for their own and our common ideas; real peacefully studying and comparing research." The group was unanimous in feeling that there was a need for a center of American studies in Europe.

Certain of their recommendations may be taken as more detailed indicators of Euro -American differences, particularly the repetition of the demand that the scholarship standards be such as to exclude everyone who was not of as high a level as the person speaking, the recurrent impatience with the expressed American preference for a more diversified group where the younger students could learn from the more advanced, and the insistent request for lectures on philosophy which revealed a deep European bias in favor of a type of systemization of thought that none of the faculty expressed. But as the Seminar is designed as a situation in which just these differences are to be experienced, in a variety of forms, the European requests that the Seminar conform more to typical European practices should probably be honored in the breach.

What the Americans Got Out of It

Americans' understanding of Europe is enormously complicated by the imbalance in their experience, due to the fact that most of the Europeans they have met, they have met in America. Even those Americans who studied in Europe, have now been confined for eight years to America, constantly associating with immigrants refugees, allied emissaries and members of governments in exile. At its simplest, this produces in Americans a picture of Europe as a place from which everyone is waiting to emigrate to the United States. At its most complex, it emphasizes the negative and nostalgic elements which are communicated by the Europeans in America giving disproportionate weight to their repudiation of and their yearning for a Europe which no longer exists, and masks a recognition of present political realities and European aspirations for the future. Experiences like the Salzburg Seminar make it possible for selected Americans to meet and work closely with Europeans who are thinking about America but without reference to emigration or escape from Europe. There they meet a Europe which the American people as a whole know practically nothing about. In the give and take of seminar and informal discussion, they have a chance to make articulate many things about American civilization - vis-à-vis Europe - which are important and significant for Euro -American communication.

For those Americans who were accustomed to think in terms of sharp national differences, the Seminar gave a new appreciation of what was common among the different nationalities of Europe. For those who had never believed that there were national differences, the Seminar gave a sharper sense that such cultural differences be reckoned with, and some sense of the difficulty of uniting Europe.

The younger Americans, most of whom had never been abroad or only in a military setting, were subjected to a pretty severe strain in their various mixed roles as assistants, administrators, wives of assistants and exhibits of the subject of the Seminar. Some of them reacted much more strongly than the Europeans to the logical research being done in a sociology seminar, objected to being interviewed, and were disturbed by lectures on contemporary America. Because they were nearer in age to the European participants and in many cases had more time, they received a fuller impact from ordinary social contacts than the professors, and in those instances where they reacted positively to the Seminar, learned a great deal, about themselves, as Americans, as well as about Europeans.

A Pilot Experiment

The greatest value of the Salzburg Seminar can be the fact that it happened, that it was thought of and executed successfully against such great odds and that the participants, Americans and Europeans reported so favorably upon it. If these facts can be sufficiently publicized to fire the imagination of other University groups and set them thinking of comparable - but not closely similar projects - then this single venture can have results far beyond the scope of the 135 lives which were touched by this summer's Seminar. One of the redeeming features of our modern interlocking world is the speed with which modern communications can make a pilot experiment such as this, known to large numbers of people. The Salzburg Seminar, properly described, should quicken the imagination of students in many American universities, and if their plans are leavened with the knowledge and vision of some European students, as it is when Richard Campbell and Scott Elledge worked together with Clemens Heller, then a rich variety of new centers of Euro-American study should be developed all over Europe, where many empty castles stand waiting.

Recommendations (for the Future)

by Margaret Mead

These recommendations are based on the sociology seminar research, the evaluation sessions, and my own observations.

1. The Seminar should be held again, should be sponsored by the Harvard Student council and should be held in Leopoldskron.
2. Plans should be prepared early in the year and students selected, courses of study announced and books or reading lists sent to the proposed participants several months in advance.
3. The participants should be encouraged to bring completed pieces of their own research, and materials from their own cultures on the subjects which they propose to study, to the Seminar so as to provide more comparative material for use in the seminars.
4. The Seminar should be formally conceived as a place of learning and exchanging ideas, but not as a place where students undertake new research.
5. The personnel of the Seminar should be diversified in age and background, and include more representatives from non-academic activities - the arts, journalism, public service, (not as government representatives, however), etc. All participants should be selected finally by the American committee

although nominations can well be obtained from a variety of sources, (as outlined in the evaluation meetings).

6. Wives and children of Americans, and of Europeans should be interviewed as possible participants, before inclusion. They are desirable particularly.
7. Although it may be advisable in some cases to pay travel expenses, the teaching and administrative staff should continue to contribute their time as a voluntary gift.
8. Economics as the best conceptualized cross national social science discipline should continue to occupy an important place.
9. More concrete American materials, in the form of movies, recording exhibits of periodicals, etc., should be available.
10. The administrative committee should continue as a team, without explicit hierarchy.
11. The administrative tasks should be analyzed to reduce the pressure for hierarchy by increasing efficiency in specified areas, like the scheduling of lectures.
12. More space should be provided for study, and it should be articulately recognized that Europeans require more privacy than that to which American students are accustomed.
13. The present practice of a schedule in which there are no overlapping lectures should be continued.
14. More rigorous requirements for speaking and understanding English should be made, but waived in the case of exceptional students.
15. A wider and better balanced ideological and class range should be sought. Where scholarships are given, there seems no need to have the group so narrowly class typed, as it was this year.
16. A careful search should be made for European participants who can actually lecture on some aspect of American civilization.
17. None of this year's students should return except as part of the administration.
18. A certain core continuity in faculty and student administration should be maintained from year to year.
19. This year's participants should be encouraged to visit and should be carefully interviewed on their impressions when they do visit.
20. The participants should plan more serious artistic ventures, reading plays, concerts, etc.