International Travel Is a Risky Business: Research, Study, & Proselytizing

https://www.e-ir.info/2018/10/21/international-travel-is-a-risky-business-research-study-proselytizing/

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Several recent events of U.S. citizens either being detained at foreign borders for social movement activities at home, repatriated to the U.S., or detained abroad for acts such as off-limits photography bring me back to the reminders and training that I received, quite emphatically, from family members when I began traveling, internationally, with them at the ripe age of six. My great uncle, George Merrell, my grandmother's brother, had been U.S. Ambassador to Afghanistan and to Ethiopia in the mid-20th century. He had been Chargé d'Affaires in Haiti early in his career, and he was Chargé d'Affaires in India immediately after World War II. He was also Consul in Harbin, Manchuria during his years of service. That is, when I was trained, beginning at age six, on how to handle international borders and both traveling and living abroad, it was very much with this context, and associated experiential knowledge, in mind.

International travel comes with hazards. The greatest one for U.S. citizens (although this point applies to anyone in regard to the national laws and rights to which they are accustomed) is that the U.S. Constitution does not apply the moment we step outside of our own borders. Once outside the borders of the U.S., the biggest lesson I received was this:

You can protest policy in the U.S. You can protest U.S. laws, acts, and anything else under the Sun to your heart's desire (within the boundaries of U.S. law, of course). But, once you exit U.S. borders, as a foreigner in another state and land, you most likely have no rights to protest the law, acts, policies, or anything else in that other state and land. And, if you cross the legal boundary and engage in an illegal act once abroad, maybe *the U.S. government can get you out of it. More often, it cannot. And as a caveat, it is usually wise – and perhaps safest – for U.S. citizens not to protest U.S. laws and policies when abroad. That is, for most of the world most of the time, including the U.S., social and political protest is a national affair to be kept at home in the domestic context and to be done by citizens of the nation-state in question. Anything else can get you in serious hot water, including significant jail time, depending upon context.*

International travel is a privilege. Being welcomed into another country as a guest is a privilege. It can be taken away at any moment. And, if it is, you are lucky if you are only deported. That is, there are a great many wonders in the world worth seeing. Russian, Chinese, or any other prison abroad is not to be counted among them.

Later in my youth, I had the opportunity to travel to the Soviet Union for a week. We traveled by train and stayed in what was then called Leningrad (now, again, St. Petersburg). We had the great privilege to spend significant time in the Hermitage, an experience unparalleled for me (although the Louvre, the British Museum, the MET, the Rijksmuseum, and the Freer and Sackler Museum come close). However, the Soviet Union also had the pesky problem of absolutely no freedom of association, speech, press, religion, etc. We were warned not to be caught on the street talking to the wrong people (but how could we know who were the "wrong people"?). Blue jeans were of a high premium at the time, but selling them for U.S. $80 (in 1981) to someone on the street would have a tourist detained for some weeks, or possibly indefinitely. Photos were especially limited. It was difficult to ensure that a photo object might *not* be on the off-limits list, so we were encouraged to be very sparing in our photography efforts. The base living conditions depicted in the film, *Reds*, as representative of the 1920s was still quite a good representation in 1981.

International travel is a risky business. And, when we travel abroad, we really are, in many ways, representatives of our people.

So, to the extent that we share as a common goal representing ourselves well and wisely, do not break the law of the nation and state in which you are visiting in international travel. The rights that you *do not have* when abroad may include, but are not limited to: freedom of association; freedom of speech; freedom of religion (e.g., freedom of religious practice, and freedom *from* religious practice or belief); and, certainly, there is no freedom of press or photography in many places.

Moreover, proselytizing is illegal or limited in some countries in Asia, Africa, Southeast Asia/Pacific Islands, Europe, the Middle East, and even in Latin America (e.g., the idea that Latin American Catholics need to be introduced to Jesus often comes as a surprise to them.) In many countries, attempts to convert individuals away from any range of religions, which are considered quite legitimate and may be important parts of local or national culture, may be considered deeply offensive and anti-pluralist. Hence such laws, for example, in pluralist countries such as Nepal, where it is a crime to encourage conversion in a way "that undermines the religion, faith, or belief of any caste, ethnic group, or community…." Christian activists in the U.S. have seen the reduction of the sentence in this law from six to five years in August 2017 as an act against themselves. However, proselytizing itself can be seen as going against the freedom *from* religion component of the international principle of freedom of religion and belief; that is, the freedom not to be bothered with someone else's religion, no matter how powerfully that person may believe that his or her religion is better than yours.

In sum, when we are abroad, we are *foreign nationals* and *guests* in other Sovereign states. We, as foreigners when abroad, typically have no rights to protest abroad, nor to challenge or undermine laws in a foreign national context (even – and especially – laws that we may personally believe to be mundane or inappropriate). Nor do we do our home country any favors by crossing those lines.

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