

## **A Summer at Cracow**

*Amy Sodaro*

This past summer TCDS hosted its 12th annual Democracy and Diversity Institute at Przegorzaly Castle in Cracow, Poland. True to its name, the institute brought together 50 participants from 28 countries in Central and Eastern Europe, Central Asia, Southeast Asia, Southern Africa and Central, South, and North America for the intensive study of contemporary issues related to democracy in the host region and around the world.

Each institute participant enrolled in two of the four offered graduate-level seminars, which provided a basis for continuous discussion in the classroom and beyond. Special evening programs, lectures by distinguished academics and intellectuals, and cultural excursions complemented the coursework and contributed significantly to the ongoing discussions and deliberations. Participants, staff, and faculty lived, worked, and shared meals together at Przegorzaly Castle, which is nestled on a hill just outside of Cracow -- a truly unique and inspiring setting for the exchange of ideas and experiences, and the formation of personal friendships and professional connections that will last far beyond the three-week institute.

Nikolina Knezevic, a participant from Serbia, described the importance of the institute as a cross-cultural experience. "It was fascinating to see the reflection of the classroom atmosphere outside the classroom," said Knezevic. "For many of us, it was the first time to experience interaction with 50 people from 28 countries from all over the world. I do not believe I have the right words to express the impressions about this aspect. The most astonishing was the ease with which the participants communicated. After we learned about certain unknown particularities about other people's regions and/or countries, we could communicate as if we knew each other long before we came to Cracow. The amount of interests, tastes, beliefs, attitudes, and wishes that we had in common is unbelievable."

The four courses offered at the 2003 Cracow Institute reflect the interdisciplinary and diverse nature of the institute and its many participants who came from a wide range of cultural backgrounds, as well as varied academic disciplines and professions. David Plotke, chair of Political Science at the Graduate Faculty, taught *Sustaining Democracy? Boundaries, Conflict, and Agreement in Democratic Politics*. Ann Snitow, Senior Lecturer in Liberal Studies, taught *Theories of Gender in Culture*. Jeffrey Goldfarb, chair of Sociology at the Graduate Faculty, taught *Democratic Culture: Societal Inclusion, Public Deliberation, and Difference*. And Elzbieta Matynia, TCDS Director and Senior Lecturer in Liberal Studies at the Graduate Faculty, together with Jonathan Veitch, director of New School University's new humanities program, taught *Globalization and the Politics of Public Memory*. All courses were taught in a seminar format allowing for dynamic and intense discussion, informed by both theoretical and case studies, and the diverse experiences of the institute participants.

"The significance of the courses taught lies also in their cross-cultural character," continued Knezevic. "The approaches used in treating social phenomena enabled open, lively discussions, which broadly captured the situation in particular countries and regions the participants came from. The desire and ease with which they learned about and understood cultural differences is invaluable."

I believe it brought the participants hope, enthusiasm and confidence in their conception of future perspectives of re-figuration of social systems." This year's evening lectures and special programs were perhaps the most diverse yet, and offered unique voices and opinions of public intellectuals, in addition to in-depth sessions about distinct regions and countries and several film screenings. The growing diversity of the institute was reflected by a panel organized by four participants from Southeast Asia who discussed their respective countries -- Malaysia, Indonesia, Singapore, and Burma -- and their work in this volatile region.

We were also treated to a panel by the four participants from Central Asia who discussed the culture, history, and present-day transitions of their countries and region. Jonathon Faull, a TCDS collaborator in South Africa, also presented a lecture on the history of his country, focusing on the last two decades of turmoil and accomplishment.

Our visits by public intellectuals and academics were equally diverse and often provocative, inciting prolonged debates and deliberations. Orly Lubin of Tel Aviv University gave a challenging talk on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, presenting a unique point of view and opening the doors for a flood of discussion. Shlomo Avineri of the Hebrew University Jerusalem discussed the Eastern European roots of elements of Israeli political culture. As in past years, Adam Michnik, the editor-in-chief of *Gazeta Wyborcza*, gave a provocative talk on politics and current events, focusing on his support for the U.S. war in Iraq, which was followed by a lengthy and lively question-and-answer session. And in a very special session, the Nobel laureate Czeslaw Milosz joined us for a remarkable evening of poetry, politics, and conversation, during which he shared his unique thoughts on art and politics, read selections from his new poems, signed books, and answered audience questions.

The range of ideas and opinions expressed in these special programs helped to fill out the classroom experience, as did the study trips to Auschwitz-Birkenau and Jagiellonian University. This part of the world, with its palpably rich and tumultuous history, was an ideal site to bring the topics and ideas discussed in class into sharper focus, which added texture to the conversations at the institute. This was further enhanced by the institute film series, during which an opportunity was offered to view both documentary and fiction films with particular relevance to the institute's topics.

These common experiences at the Democracy & Diversity Institute allowed participants to make close personal connections, accomplish academic goals, and gain insight into the work they are doing at their home institutions. Most importantly, the institute introduced students to an international community of scholars, creating bonds that will last a lifetime. Ana-Maria Pascal, a participant from Romania, summed up her experience in these words:

“This is, I believe, the best thing that the Cracow summer program has to offer: a sense of belonging to a (more than professional) community. I’m not sure which of its ingredients gives it this flavor: if it is its setting (the proximity of the woods combined with the openness of the horizon), its style (the total spontaneity allowed during sessions), its agenda (the [meta]physical experiences and existential crises that are likely to occur during the various types of study trips to historical places like Auschwitz or to local jazz clubs), or its soul (a volcanic cocktail with blueberry topping, in a foggy glass) that keeps everything in it so uniquely together.” q

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