

IBEI Graduation Talk (Barcelona June 20, 2016)

Warren Quinton

Congratulations, IBEI class of 2016! I want to extend my sincerest thanks to everyone for giving me the opportunity to speak on behalf of our class. It is a humbling honour for me especially when I do not believe I have either the wisdom or qualifications to render any advice to the people in this room. So let my words then not be considered wise or advisory but rather mere reflections on my and possibly your journey these last nine months that have culminated with us being together today. However, first things first, I would like to give some well deserved thanks on behalf of the students and me to many who have helped us here at IBEI.

I like to think of IBEI as analogous to the United Nations. So let your first set of thanks go to the IBEI secretaries general, Robert Kissack, our Head of Studies, and Jacint Jordana, IBEI's director. They have been excellent stewards of IBEI and have acted as our facilitators, moderators and yes, sometimes mediators over the course of this year.

Next, can we also say thank you to the IBEI Security Council by which I mean all those who work in the academic office, especially Blanca, Mariona, and Rebecca. Thank you for efforts in keeping the world or at least IBEI from going to ruin. Also, can I say thank you so much from every IBEI student here ... for not sending us a last minute change of venue or time for tonight's graduation. Seriously, though, a profound thank you for always being so wonderfully helpful. We do appreciate how hard your jobs are, and you have always met out requests, problems, and even our demands and complaints with a smile.

We'd next like to thank the teaching staff, in my analogy the intelligentsia and civil society of our world. Thank you, teachers, for imparting your knowledge, expertise and support. Our classes have been stimulating and enjoyable. We hope our evaluations have not dented your pride too much. And know that at least Lea got the scale the wrong way round, so there will be some 5s in there.

Finally, thank you so much to all of our families who have helped us reach this important point. It would be remiss of me not to mention my own family, especially my mum and dad. But parents, I know that I can speak for all of us students when I say that we would not be here without your unwavering support. The money has been well spent, I can assure you. Well mostly.

A petición de una alumna, me dirijo también a todos los familiares que estén aquí con nosotros y que no hablen inglés. Primero, les pido disculpas que ésta será la única parte en castellano, y créanme que es para el beneficio de todos, pero lo importante es darles las gracias a ustedes de parte de sus hijos por todo el apoyo que han brindado. La verdad es que nos olvidamos diariamente, pero el simple hecho es que debemos todo a ustedes. Gracias.

So if IBEI is a microcosm of the international order, and the IBEI management is the UN, that would make us--the students the member states. The question is: what

insights do our interactions over the course of these 9 months offer up for understanding this system. Are we realists, fighting among ourselves in a Hobbesian state of nature? Or are we liberals at heart, seeing collaboration as the greater good? Well, in the social sphere, I think I can safely say that in this short space of time we have all been liberals as I know I have forged some strong and lasting friendships, and I know many others have done the same., However, in the professional student context there were two areas where we, or perhaps just I, have displayed some offensive and defensive realist tendencies. The first is Group Essays. Why do we have them? What's the logic? You have to worry about getting a loose cannon, like North Korea, in your group for a start. That's not going to be pretty (I won't speculate as to who North Korea might be). Upon reflection, I realize my aversion to group work has forced me to self-evaluate because in the real world I take issue with so much importance being placed on individual state sovereignty, yet in my own personal world, I do not want to share the glory with others. I am too much of a control freak— perhaps I'm the United States. Plus I'm a massive grammar pedant— which perhaps makes me North Korea. And for the record, "it's" with an apostrophe means it is or it has!

We were also quite realist in the face of the IBEI migrant crisis. Of course, I am referring to those interlopers, the GSE students who would attempt to cross our wall and use our study room. Trump would never have let this happen. And we were less than forthcoming in letting them use the study room, Yet I must ask, where was their attempt to integrate? All they did was come in and take our workspaces, speaking their own language no less. I don't see why I should have to learn mathematics.

Our realist tendencies do raise an important question though that reminds me of an often quoted phrase sometimes attributed to Winston Churchill. It can be paraphrased as "***If you're not a Socialist at 20 you have no heart, but if you remain one at 30 you have no head.***" This quotation, for me, represents this tension deep at the heart of International Relations. It is the tension between idealism and cold pragmatism. The implication of the quotation is that while idealism is something we should strive for, there comes a time when we need to grow up, stop living in a fantasy world and maybe just maybe make pragmatic compromise.

I'm over thirty, so with my socialist leanings, according to the saying I have no head. Not that I'm a good socialist either: more of an armchair socialist, I'm afraid to say. Nevertheless, I just can't bring myself to give up those ideals. They just seem so reasonable. So what has IBEI shown me about whether I should become less idealistic?

I took this course precisely because I wanted to learn about the reality of the international system. Realism, of course, is so-called because it supposedly reflects the true nature of the world, as opposed to some utopian vision of it. My instinct is naturally to recoil from this assertion and I ask now more than ever why shouldn't we be idealistic in our goals? Why shouldn't we want change? And if we want change and want to maintain our idealism and hopefulness for the future, how can we be satisfied with the status quo? Reality is after all itself socially-constructed. Even the Realists' precious anarchy, the defining justification for their "let's be an arsehole to each other" world view, is "what we make of it." So the first thing to say is that it seems to me to be

uncontroversial that we have to have a vision of the world that is different from the way it is now.

But the second thing to say is that for me, it's not a question of being a dreamer, some armchair politician, who thinks it might be nice if the world were like that instead of like this. We no longer have the luxury of utopian thinking. With climate change, civil wars, internal and external conflict, escalating poverty and ongoing humanitarian crises throughout the world, we have little choice but to do something different. Now more than ever, we need idealistic alternative visions for the way things could be and not just be resigned to the way things are. Now maintaining your idealistic vision in a realist world is hard. Very hard. Because it is far easier to do nothing than to do something, as I know firsthand.

But I am proud to say here at IBEI, this student body, with whom I have studied, collaborated and worked have made a choice to do something. In fact, on any given day, IBEI students have helped homeless people here in Barcelona, have headed to Lesbos to work with refugees, have raised money to help the citizens of Ecuador after a terrible earthquake, and have sacrificed potentially lucrative employment in other professions to try idealistically to save some small part of the world. While I have essentially taken this course for educational curiosity. This is why I have no right to give you advice. Because it would be an insult for me to encourage you to go out and change the world, when most of you are already doing that, each in your own unique way. So thank you, my fellow IBEI students, for making a choice to do something and for giving this armchair socialist hope that idealism can triumph over realism and that change can happen and has happened.

One last thought, if you'll humour me. I think it's worth mentioning what a privilege it has been to study in this wonderful city! Barcelona is full of beautiful contradictions: it's a united city of shared culture, values and history, but it is also this mess of discrete neighbourhoods, each with its own distinct identity. It's a welcoming city that thrives off tourism, full of friendly faces and exciting places to visit, but it is also proudly Catalan and often resistant to outside influences, linguistic, cultural, Madrileño...

I know that many non-EU students here are madly jealous of the ease with which we were able to come here (This might change on Thursday). But I myself am so pleased that the sometimes ridiculous bureaucracy didn't put you off. I feel so lucky to have studied alongside such a cosmopolitan group of people. For my part, Barcelona, and IBEI, is a richer place for all of the diversity that is found here.

Anyone who knows me knows that I'm less than keen on football, so I feel disgusted with myself for doing this, but I'm going to quote Lionel Messi. He says:

"I've never stopped being Argentine, and I've never wanted to. I feel very proud of being Argentine, even though I left there...Barcelona is my home because both the club and the people here have given me everything, but I won't stop being Argentine."

This is something I can relate to having lived the last 6 years away from the UK. It's really my response to any Brexiters out there who feel that a good reason for leaving the EU is because of cultural homogenization, the loss of British values, etc.

I think it's safe to assume that nobody at IBEI feels as if being away from their place of birth causes them to feel their nationality any less. And that's because we carry our identities within us. If the presence of other cultures is seen as a threat to one's own identity, perhaps that person's sense of identity is too weak to begin with.

I have often heard comments about the EU this year, about the lack of a united European culture, supposedly proof that the experiment could never work. I ask myself why we feel the need to zero-sum everything. This idea that either we have a national identity or we lose that to a European identity is inherently wrong. The two can coexist, just as a sense of regional identity can coexist with a national identity. All of this always brings me back to Wendt, just as anarchy is to the international system, so identity is what we make of it. If we allow external challenges to affect us, the fault, dear IBEI, is not in our stars, but in ourselves.

And with that rather pretentious statement, I close my speech. Good luck everyone, firstly with your dissertations. Let's not forget that we have that hurdle still to come. But also in whatever you do afterwards. I hope the world will be a better place for our having come together. Thank you.

Warren Quinton
Master's in International Relations student 2015-2016