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International home

Everyone who comes at Ihouse, be it for a semester, for a year, or longer, will certainly be able to relate to my experience. Whoever was expecting “normal” dorm-life was not in the wrong, but also fare from the reality.

Everyday at the International House is a trip to some unknown place, where everyone can express itself in the same language, but has its own very different experience and perception of the world. Living at the international is about crossing many different borders. Not only the border of your own country by encountering people who come from the furthest or most unknown places, but also about crossing your own mental boundaries. You may find yourself constantly asking these questions: why is that person thinking this way, greeting me this way, talking, acting or thinking that way... In sum, why is he or she not “normal” with me. Understanding difference is about understanding that one's own values and norms are not universal, and how normality is so subjective that there is no point looking for it in the people you will meet at the international house. Mingling with individuals that are so different from you requires redefining yourself, questioning your own standards on every little action you take: eating pasta at breakfast can make sense, a kiss on both cheeks is not always the best way to say hi, wine is not welcome on all tables, arriving late is normal in many places... In that sense, leaving at the International House taught me to be humble, open-minded and more flexible in my social encounters.

It also taught me to be understanding to one's cliches about my own culture – and how many cliches are there about France and French people! –, and at the same time, try and convey has much reality as possible about my country: no, frogs are not a common thing to find in my plate, I rarely hold a baguette nor wear a beret, and guys do not sing serenades or poems under my window to seduce me. Being French is something different, that probably even I could not define: belonging to Europe, feeling bonded by a common, beautiful though difficult
language, sharing some perceptions of family, the role of the State, workplace and school norms, but it is also living in a place of diversity where no one thinks or act exactly the same, as is true for all countries, all regions of the world. And I think that this is a very important teaching of living at the International House: not only getting to know different cultures, but also challenging your prejudice about them, finding common grounds, erasing the cliches and learning more about the singularity of each individual.

Now, what is so special about my own I-House experience? I came to Berkeley with the expectation to find a very open-minded and cosmopolitan university environment, and determined to learn more about international politics. I wanted to learn about inconvenient subjects: I studied nuclear policy, the Middle East - region that shares a quite tumultuous relation with the United States. But what is probably the most surprising, looking back at these 8 months, is how much I learnt outside of class, from my experience as an International House resident. By interacting every day with Egyptians, Lebanese, Moroccan, and Turkish people, I was able to understand how the peoples of this region perceived the Arab Spring, how it changed – or didn't – their everyday life. After all they are the first concerned about everything that I am theoretically studying, and living next to them definitely taught me more than any reading or any conference. And beyond that, I learnt that I wouldn't be able to understand the history and the present of these countries if I hadn't been in contact with their culture: Arab music, food, lifestyle, everyday anecdotes about transportation, wealth, time perceptions... All these “details” tell a lot more than the facts reported in the newspapers.

Next semester, I will be studying International relations with Middle East. I learnt Arabic at Berkeley, but I learnt even more from my friends at the International House. It is thus clear how my experience at the International House changed me: opening my eyes, widening my horizons, and making me discover what I was passionate about. This is probably an average experience, but this has been determining for me. A famous French saying states: “Les voyages forment la jeunesse” - “Traveling shape/educates the youth”. This year at the International House will probably be my most beautiful and educating travel, while staying at home.