

# Travel Impressions from the US and Russia in early 2015

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## 1 Around the edges of the 'West'

Being an only very reluctantly retiring academic provides plenty of opportunities/excuses to travel around the world. It also helps that the children are gone and the instant surgical correction of a herniated disk in May 2014 allows me to continue playing the "Rüstige Rentner = Spry Retiree." The economy class carried me from Berlin to Chicago, to Salt Lake City, to Quito to Ekaterinburg, to Oslo to Seattle and back to Berlin in a bit more than a months. I stayed only a couple of days each in Norway and Canada, which are rightly or wrongly seen as paragons of modern, moderate, multi-cultural "Western civilization." Though when Gandhi was asked what he thought of the latter notion, he allegedly answered that "it would be a good idea". I could not observe much about the slightly boring Norwegian and Canadian "Musterknaben=Poster Boys", whose fault lines are certainly much harder to detect.

North American media are not too much into "The West" but prefer to talk about the "US and its Allies", just to make clear who the boss is. Of course Russia has been excommunicated from Western Civilization, for such diverse reasons as annexing the Crimea and lacking enthusiasm for Conchita Wurst of Eurovision fame. Ecuador under leadership of the economics professor Raffael Correa wishes to quickly join the "developed world", also an only vaguely defined concept, probably including the BASIC countries to some extent.

## 2 Revisting the US

I lived in the US, from January 1982 to July 1993, had my most productive professional period there, and with the never tiring lead of my wife saw my four children turn into (pre-)teens. I dare say we did feel at home, even though we were always a little different from the perceived mainstream, which was only gradually loosing its cultural dominance. When Klaus refused to say the pledge of allegiance because he did not see himself as American, his teacher lost her

countenance and only apologized the day after. But it was by no means a forgone conclusion that we would go back to Germany, though it seems very hard now to imagine the 'kids' scattered around North America rather than Europe.

From my first visit 1960 as a YMCA boy scout in Camp Hi Rock, Connecticut till the workshop that I organized 1991 in Breckenridge Colorado I was basically a fan of most things American, especially, the sunny expanses and the popular music. My world view was largely anti-communist and on race relations I felt the preachy Europeans did not know what they were talking about. Only gradually American exceptionalism developed the ugly "in-your-face" character that obliterates the self-deprecating Anglo Saxon humor that I had cherished since my arrival to Australia in early 1976. I could not accept the US taking the law in its own hand by bombing Afghanistan and Sudan after the attack on their embassies in Nairobi and Dar Es Salam. From the first gulf war on I found American and Western pronouncements and actions more and more lacking in credibility and moral justification. Now I find them downright criminal and worthy of examination by the ICC.

In contrast to more sophisticated Europeans I never cared much about food, literature and the visual arts, so for me there is much less to be deprived off by crossing the Atlantic. What I am looking forward is easy going give and take with some clowning around and down to earth pragmatism to get things done.

### 3 Watching the Oscars

The middle aged lady on the stool next to me does not like the way the waiter is serving chips. Then she qualifies her remark with the statement that *she has not been in the bartending industry for quite some time!*. So much for no pretensions. We are watching the Oscar ceremony, a quint-essential American event that is nevertheless wildly popular throughout the world. It seems all quite wholesome, harmless, and socially even progressive. I am deperate to fit into this place and am already thankful that there was only one Oscar prize for 'American Sniper'. At the box office this war epic ran only second behind Fifty Shades of Gray, but it stayed ahead of the Oscar winning film Boyhood. The military flick is about a Navy Seal who personally wiped out or rendered paralyzed a few hundred individuals in Irak and Afghanistan. We do not have to worry about these victims, because our hero did it *in exemplary service for his country*. Besides, he had a truly pretty wife and two super cute kids, who provided a tear jerking back drop for his grandiose military burial including an interstate cavalcade to his home town somewhere in Texas. In a twist worthy of a B movie, he died not at the hands of the evil enemy but was shot in the US by some psychologically unhinged fellow veteran. That is not an untypical story since more GI's die prematurely at home than get killed during the various campaigns of the last two decades.

## 4 Loving thy country

Again, this is particularly strange to a German, for whom *Deutschland über alles* sounds like a faint echo of a very distant past. One would have thought Obamas by any measure exceptionalist speech to the cadets at Colorado Springs in March 2014 could have done the trick of assuaging his conservative critics. But no, Julio Guilano just raised doubts about Obama's love for the USA and his absolute convictions of its in every way exceptional role in this world. All good Republicans are asked by the press whether they doubt that Obama really fervently loves this country or whether he is merely incapable to serve it well due to his left leaning politics. There is the explicit complaint that he did not really grow up like us, possibly he even knows too much about the rest of the world. So yes, Obama lives in a pretty crazy system, and must be forgiven for some of his actions, but not the droning. Of course if one is sufficiently patriotic a successful strategy against ISIS is easy to find, or so they say. Despite the different level of patriotic fervor there was a similarly flavored stupid claim by Merkel's opponent Steinbrück that she, having grown up in East Germany, did never develop the emotional attachment to "Europe" as we properly reeducated West-Germans. Now the Republicans patriots, including all but 7 of their senators, have told the Iranian government that any international agreement entered into by the Obama administration is not binding for the subsequent, presumably Republican, presidency. The end of international relations as we know them, brought on by a powerful rogue state.

## 5 Watching (Fow) News

After being secluded in a friends sanitized apartment for a week (no TV, severely limited internet) I spent a night in a Pasadena hotel and watched some mainstream TV. The usual fracas of advertisements and previews scatters the brain and makes the remote control and absolute necessary viewing tool. I feared some cardiac distress from watching Fow News but in the event was more worried that the presenters and talkers would drop dead on camera. All the terrorism experts are ex CIA guys or Foreign Service Personal who seem to push seventy. Even older stalwarts like Oliver North and George Will are still around, the latter in a sadly frozen pose, physically and ideologically. I used to respect him as a compassionate conservative and always liked his moniker that *politics is like football (both American) committee meetings interrupted by spurts of violence*. In the morning Capitol Salt Lake City one can actually see Russia Today in the hotel. Al Jazeera I have caught nowhere.

## 6 Good guys on a rampage

In the hotel bar I overheard some travelers, who have been abroad even in Russia. They marveled how these communists never get anything done and how they don't value human life at all, in contrast to us who cherish and protect it. It was not clear whether they meant just the US or the whole Western Community. Recently I heard the same statement from a German development official. I suppose every big empire has managed to install this notion in the home crowd while depicting the outsiders as brutal barbarians. We have just been through a 25 year period, where the West had no serious competitors in terms of military and economical might. As a result whole regions are aflame, hundreds of thousands of mostly Muslim people have been killed and maimed with evermore powerful conventional weapons. Furthermore millions died from the consequent disruptions of established autocratic systems, which provided in hindsight more effective government than the subsequent Western approved if not downright installed regimes. While these were partly unintended consequences, one would certainly expect some soul searching or at least post intervention analysis. I recently attended a discussion with several current and former members of the German parliaments foreign affairs committee. They were unanimous in stating that there would be no critical assessment of the 13 years long intervention of German troops in Afghanistan, which produced amongst others the firebombing of some 150 Afghanis near two tank trucks that were not threatening anybody. Rather than convicted of a war crime the German colonel in charge was promoted to general. There is no indication that the American military and much less the private mercenary companies hired by Western companies and governments are held accountable for their actions. Germany lost some 60 soldiers overall, mostly to IUD attacks and pure accidents or suicides. Each one of these comrades killed or injured ( I am still in the reserve and know some soldiers who served in Afghanistan) represents personal tragedy, Nevertheless, rather than having any military significance on the ground these losses were nothing more than ceremonial sacrifices on the altar of symbolic NATO solidarity.

## 7 Reading the paper

The technology changes have taken their toll and drastically reduced the newspaper variety and availability. I pretty soon gave up my daily morning habit of reading the paper while gobbling up a liter of coffee. One used to stumble at every street corner over newspaper vending machines, now they are few and far between. In grocery stores and at 7/11 one gets apart from the imbecile yellow press mostly the Chicago Herald and Wall Street Journal. It is owned by Murdoch and that showed. As I observed with the San Francisco Examiner, the Tribune has also been reduced to thin news sheet reporting mostly on local crimes, other calamities and

of course celebrities. My host Torsten observed that acquiring the paper usually took more minutes times than my cursive reading of them. Of course that is not true for the somewhat harder to find New York Times, still a comprehensive newspaper in the European sense. During my stay Netanyahu visited Washington on the invitation of the Republican congress but without consent of president Obama. Every day the NYT carried paid full page advertisements pro and contra the visit and thus contra or pro the somewhat more independent policy of the Obama administration vis a vis the Israeli government. The worst was an advertisement depicting Obama's National Security adviser Susan Rice in an unfavorable pose facing a row of skulls on a shelf. Headline "Susan Rice has a problem with genocide", because she does not support immediately bombing Iran, as another former UN ambassador of the US J. Bolton demanded a few days later in a commentary of the same paper. As an Argonne colleague observed analogously inflammatory advertisements and commentary, say graphically accusing Israeli of genocide in Gaza or demanding the bombing of its nuclear facilities, which are completely outside any international framework, would of course never be printed.

Apart from this special "issue" the NYT is generally also intensely partisan pro domo US. The last issue of March 17 that I read on the plane carried an article on Afghanistan under the headline "After U.S. Exit, Rough Justice of Afghan Militias" and basically said that local militias, which were armed by the retreating U.S. forces now terrorized the local population for their own ends. There was no mention of any element of justice whatsoever, so the headline was clearly misleading. Now I see on the net that in a move that resembles the ministry of truth of George Orwell fame, the headline was changed after two and three quarter hours to the more appropriate "Afghan-militia-leaders-empowered-by-us-to-fight-taliban-inspire-fear-in-villages". See <http://www.newsdiffs.org/diff/855445/855613/www.nytimes.com/2015/03/18/world/asia/afghan-militia-leaders-empowered-by-us-to-fight-taliban-inspire-fear-in-villages.html>

It's still there two years later. There was also an article on the American basket ball player DIANA TAURASI, a Californian born American with Argentinian/Italian parents. For seven years she has been playing half the year in the very Ekaterinburg, which I visited later as described below. This "bizarre" behavior can only be understood because the American womens basketball league has some salary cap that is low compared to the salaries payed in Russia thanks to the generosity of some Oligarchs. The NYT reports that one of them handed her another 15000 Euros after she lost the first bundle of the same value in a drunken stupor. These are the nice guys, the by American standards comprehensible episodes, compared to the mysterious locals. Quote "The thing about Russia" she says, "Everyone is Russian. They're just Russian. They're Russian." There is apparently no way that a sane person would live here voluntarily. "I've probably drunk enough vodka for a village," Taurasi said. "With the weather as poor as it is", she added, "and nothing to do, one might as well be hung over." Of course this compares unfavorable with the various creative activities that the denizens of American inner cities busy themselves with in their spare time. And then this strange language, of course

she could not be expected to learn any of it in 7 years. The nice oligarch died in a hail of bullets and some other millionaire took over, some kind of public relations stunt. In short, an American female athlete in her completely understandable quest to rake in the millions before her career is over goes to a barely inhabitable foreign land, where the only kindred spirits are rambunctious oligarchs that have money to throw around and don't indulge in any strange nationalism. The locals, miners and peasants serve as a mysterious backdrop and apparently do not want to become anything else but Russians, like say American or Ukrainians, which would at least make some sense to the American reader.

A real quality paper might have used the tear-jerker celebrity story to say something about the execution of the Tsar's family in 1918, and the key role this city played in the second world war, when a lot of the Soviet heavy industry was relocated there out of the range of the German Luftwaffe. Still today, it is the home of the Russian tank production. Moreover, there are several universities a theatre hall and a population of 1.4 millions, which consists not only of "miners" as the NYT wrote. One might also mention that this was the fiefdom of Boris Jeltsin, a hero in Western mythology but outside the region of Ekaterinburg almost as unpopular as Mikhail Gorbachev. The latter is practically a saint in Germany, while the fact that he now supports the evil emperor Putin is conveniently overlooked in the Western press.

## 8 Being an acquired talent

The corporate staffer who sent me my temporary contract at Argonne holds the title of *talent acquisition specialist*. I spent two half days being instructed to the conditions of employment by the human resources department and the security folks. To establish the incredible diversity of the new employees we were split into groups of four to five and challenged to find three common characteristics. Our group could not find any common sports or music category that we were all interested in. So I suggested that we all had been pretty good in science classes, which not surprisingly turned out to be the case. In some desperation I dared to notice that we were all white males, but the session moderator ruled that out immediately. He suggested instead less politically incorrect that all five of us might like wine, which everybody subscribed to happily to get it over with. The final common characteristics was that not only a Frenchman and I but also the three Americans had been to Europe, wonder oh wonder. The good news according to the US government is that there are currently only four countries supporting terrorism, namely Cuba, Somali, Irak, and Syria. Of course Snowden is a super bad guy and such a major leak must be prevented by any means in the future. Since my days at Argonne in the late 80s and early 90s, security has been significantly strengthened and every staff member or visitor must wear a badge all the time. Most importantly, everything has become a lot more fluent with staffers spending a considerable portion of their time writing proposals.

## 9 Lecturing in Ekaterinburg

Not very surprising, because of the low oil price and the Western sanctions public money in Russia has become tighter, especially for foreign academic visitors. So Sergey Kumkov of the Ural Federal University in Ekaterinburg had agreed that I would pay the flight and he would cover my local expenses. The room in the University Guesthouse was very comfortable and the staff very friendly, even the turnstyle keeper on the ground floor. They refused any tips and there were only very few guests. Visitors were accepted till 23.00 and now questions asked, so it seemed a bit more liberal than in my sons Philipps student days at the Lomonossov University in 2004.

Lets cut through to the most urgent question. I could not hear or even sense any serious criticism of Putin. Most people from all walks of life stress that he has brought some order to the place after the years of Gorbachev and Jeltsin, which are seen as Western inspired and co-directed policy disasters. One hears unprovoked passionate pleas that the Crimea is Russian heartland that was formally given away on a piece of paper by the drunkards Khrushchev and Jeltsin. Of course the Lavrov Lament that the victorious West tore up whatever there was in the way of an international order is taken as unshakable fact of live.

Even though I am running out of life time in my pursuit to get on top of Russian and Spanish I took some classes from a lady from the foreign language department. She was actually a distant relative of Jeltsin and one of the few people that spoke kindly of him. She knew English, German and French so that one could make comparisons between words and grammatical constructions, which I like as Eselsbrücken (memory cribs). As I said, time is running out and Russian is not only grammatically complicated but only very few words ring an Indo-European bell. Of course, Spanish is also not nearly as simple as it is made out to be, but still its eventual command is a more realistic goal.

The Ural Federal University has 35000 students and states on its web page: "Our aspiration is to become a world-class university in the heart of Eurasia committed to the complex and sustainable development of research and teaching." World class abounds these days everywhere. Its top ranked department is actually mathematics but I visited a department in the engineering school at another campus. Below is the invitation poster. Questions and answers were traded in a mixture of English and Russian and the attendance was quite sparse and irregular. I only got through a fraction of the content listed on the final page.

31 марта – 9 апреля

Институт математики Университета им. Гумбольдта  
(Берлин, Германия)

в период 31 марта – 9 апреля прочитает небольшой курс лекций

## “ЧИСЛЕННЫЕ МЕТОДЫ НЕГЛАДКОЙ ОПТИМИЗАЦИИ НА ОСНОВЕ КУСОЧНОЙ ЛИНЕАРИЗАЦИИ”

**(NONSMOOTH NUMERICS VIA PIECEWISE LINEARIZATION):**

**31 марта (вторник). Лекция 1.** Принципы обобщенного дифференцирования в Евклидовых пространствах (Generalized Differentiation concepts in Euclidean spaces).

**1 апреля (среда). Лекция 2.** Кусочная линеаризация (КЛ) процедур нелинейного оценивания (Piecewise Linearization of nonsmooth evaluation procedures).

**2 апреля (четверг). Лекция 3.** Представление и анализ КЛ-функций в модуль-нормальной форме (Representation and analysis of PL functions in abs-normal form).

**3 апреля (пятница). Лекция 4.** Методы и условия решения кусочно-линейных уравнений (Methods and conditions for solving piecewise linear equations).

**6 апреля (понедельник). Лекция 5.** Доказательное решение линейных уравнений с интервальными коэффициентами (Verified solution of linear equations with interval coefficients).

**7 апреля (вторник). Лекция 6.** Методы безусловной негладкой оптимизации (Methods for unconstrained nonsmooth optimization).

**8 апреля (среда). Лекция 7.** (резерв). Численное интегрирование негладких динамических систем (Numerical integration of nonsmooth dynamical systems).

**9 апреля (четверг). Лекция 8.** (резерв). Итоговый обзор и дальнейшие расширения методов (Summary and extensions).

Лекции, продолжительностью 1.5 часа, проводятся с 12–00 в аудитории Р-217 (ИРИТ-РТФ), зал Ученого Света Радиотехнического факультета, 2й этаж.

**Лекции читаются на английском языке**

**ПРИГЛАШАЮТСЯ ВСЕ ЖЕЛАЮЩИЕ:** аспиранты, магистранты, научные сотрудники, преподавательский состав, интересующиеся методами оптимизации и интервальным анализом.



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Вход свободный