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### ***Bringing Concepts to Life in International Relations and Comparative Politics***

Educators have long used case studies to help clarify abstract theories and concepts for students. Through case studies, students can observe how the theories and concepts that they have learned in the classroom apply to “the real world” or, sometimes, hypothetical cases. In my teaching practice as an instructor of international and comparative politics, I also use case studies in and out of the classroom to teach students about cases of which they may have little to no knowledge, including countries, cities, or other groups of people who exist outside of traditional political boundaries (e.g., some ethnic groups).

This resource provides a series of inductive in-class exercises to help students unpack important concepts in political science, especially ones that are often misused or misunderstood. I used these exercises throughout the semester. While the concept I focus on here is “empire,” these exercises can be used for a variety of concepts in international relations and comparative politics such as:

- Terrorism
- Genocide
- State
- Nation
- Democracy
- Authoritarianism
- Hegemony
- Sovereignty

While the examples provided here are rooted in international relations and comparative politics, instructors in other political science subfields can use them as well.

1. **Introduction to the concept:** at the beginning of the semester, ideally before students have read about or discussed the concept such as the first class, have the students briefly write a definition of the concept on a piece of paper. In my course titled “Global Militarization and the Politics of Empire,” I asked students to write down their definition of “empire.” Students can either write the definitions anonymously or write their names. I then asked students if anyone was willing to share their definitions and we had a (brief) class discussion about empire based on their definitions. I collected their written definitions at the end of class.
2. **Conceptualization through induction:** a class or two later in the semester, have students come up with their own necessary and sufficient criteria for the concept through case studies. Before class, it can be helpful for students to read some literature that discusses the concept so they can see how political scientists have thought of it and what debates exist over this definition (there is almost always something!). In my class, for example, I assigned students a review article by Yale H. Ferguson, “Approaches to Defining

"Empire" and Characterizing United States Influence in the Contemporary World," which covered a variety of approaches to defining and definitions of empire. Review articles such as Young and Findley's (2011) "Promise and Pitfalls of Terrorism Research" are generally useful for students to get a sense of the concept in political science including the different definitions that political scientists use for the same concept.

Although the exposure to various definitions of the concept means that the exercise is not purely inductive (students have some idea about what the concept means based on what other scholars have said), the exercise takes place early enough in the semester so that students' ideas about the concept are not fully formulated or solidified. Additionally, providing them with multiple definitions makes them have to consider which criteria and definitions are more accurate.

To refresh students' memories (and bypass potential issues stemming from students not reading), instructors may briefly highlight the definitions of the concept of interest from the reading or administer a short quiz about the reading to help reinforce what students read at the beginning of class.

Then, divide the class into small groups (in my class of 11 students, I broke them into groups of 3-4) and provide them with potential cases of the concept. In my course, I provided them with short readings (1-3 pages each) about three potential instances of "empire." While there are a lot of potential examples I could have chosen, I wanted to provide them with cases that represented a range of "empire-ness": a case that we conventionally think of as an empire and cases that are not conventionally discussed as "empires." At the same time, I wanted to give them examples that were from roughly the same timeframe to make them more or less comparable (e.g., not comparing the Roman Empire to the present-day US). I also wanted to expose them to cases with which they may not be familiar. Finally, I wanted to select cases we would not talk about later in the semester (which included the British Empire, Imperial Japan, and the US). I ended up selecting the Ottoman Empire, present-day China, and the Lakota. One potential variation is to "anonymize" the potential cases of the concept that you provide to try to combat any underlying assumptions or biases.

I tasked students with identifying whether or not these were empires and why, as well as identifying what characteristics empires should have. The students took about 15 minutes to read and discuss these examples in groups, during which time I walked around the class asking questions and observing. Some groups finished discussing the examples faster than other groups. One way to prevent students from being idle while others are still talking is to prepare additional potential cases and give them to the groups who finish early.

We then discussed these examples as a group and why they were empires or not. One potential extension of this discussion is to discuss our positionality and how that might

influence whether or not we view certain examples as “cases” of our concept of interest. While my (mostly white) students, for example, decided that the Lakota were not an empire, individuals with Lakota or other indigenous heritage may perceive them as such. The discussion of positionality is fruitful for other political science concepts as well.

We then brainstormed a class list of criteria for something to be an empire, talking about each potential criterion and sometimes debating them as a class.

### 3. **Concept Refinement**

We finalized our list of criteria and used this list to evaluate other potential cases of the concept throughout the semester. In my class, we discussed Great Britain, Imperial Japan, and the US as possible cases of empire. In class, showed them our list of criteria and asked them whether these cases met enough of these criteria to be considered “empires” and whether the criteria needed to be revised after considering these potential cases.

Fundamental to our discussion of empire over the semester was the issue of measurement. As we revisited our criteria, students began to realize that some of the criteria were necessary but not sufficient or vice-versa. Similarly, we discussed whether “empire” should be understood as a dichotomous concept (either an empire, meeting all of our criteria, or not) or on a spectrum of “empire-ness.” Thus, this exercise also yields itself to methodological discussions as well.

While we are not yet at the end of the semester, I intend on asking students to reflect on what “empire” is and how their thinking about it has changed. I will compare them to what they said at the beginning of the class and our criteria of empire and show them the results (anonymously).