

De-centering the US in the Global Politics Classroom

Incorporating Alternative Sources, Perspectives, and Forms of Knowledge

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Although global politics and international relations are supposedly international in outlook and global in scope, the fields are often taught from Anglo-American perspective. Not only does this result in a somewhat parochial understanding of and approach to these fields but can also discourage students from pursuing them further insofar as the fields are presented as not necessarily responsive to a broader spectrum of interests, concerns, and experiences.

This resource offers three tools to help address these concerns by incorporating alternative sources, perspectives, and forms of knowledge into the global politics classroom. The three tools presented below can be used in tandem or separately, and include an in-class exercise, tools for incorporating alternative “texts” into the classroom, and a proposed assignment.

In-class Framing Exercise: “Draw a cat!”

This is a five to ten-minute in-class exercise used to help make students aware of the oftentimes unconscious perspectives that we take for granted. The exercise precedes as follows:

1. Students are asked to take a minute to draw a cat (or another animal).
2. Different ways of drawing a cat are then shown on the board or on slides (e.g. head on the left, head on the right, from below, from behind, etc.) and students are asked to indicate which way they drew the cat.
3. In most cases, the majority of students will draw the cat with the head on the left and tail on the right.
4. The purpose of the exercise is then explained: we are used to thinking about the world in certain ways and are often unconscious of these. Just like in drawing a cat, there are many different, and potentially equally valid, ways that this could be done. But how we think about and perceive the world is in many ways socially contingent and constructed—the shaped by our experiences, background, and environments. As such, it is important that we make ourselves aware and conscious of these different perspectives and how they shape our perceptions and understandings.

Incorporating Alternative “Texts”

Using alternative or “non-traditional” texts can be an engaging way to bring additional perspectives into the classroom in a way that is approachable to students. These sorts of materials not only encourage greater student involvement and participation by avoiding reading fatigue, but also allow students to explore alternative forms of knowledge and communication, and diverse experiences and perspectives, including those that come from other traditions and/or emerge out of non-Eurocentric cosmological or ontological understandings of the world.

There is a wide range of different sorts of “texts” that can be brought in and used in this way, including novels, poetry, films, and other literary texts, music and music videos, paintings and other forms of visual art, and video essays and podcasts to name a few. However, given the range of possible sources that can be drawn on and used, it can be difficult to know where to begin and how to select “texts.” As such, below is a short checklist of steps for how to go about selecting and incorporating these sorts of sources into the classroom.

How to find and select alternative “texts”

1. Decide on the *goal or objective* that the source should help advance. Possible objectives include:
 - Helping students gain a more concrete or “down-to-earth” understanding of (elements of) a particular concept or theory by showing how it is apparent or visible in wider social discourse and culture.

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- Demonstrating the applicability of more abstract ideas to lived experience and to understanding the world around us.
 - Providing students with more grounded or human perspectives on historical events and/or how social and political structures shape human experience.
 - Giving students a better understanding of the social, political, and cultural contexts in which historical events took place.
2. Consider the *types of sources* that could be used to advance this object.
 - For example, films, novels, and poetry can be useful for providing students with a more human perspective on historical events, while video essays and podcasts are helpful for making concepts and theories more approachable. Paintings and other works of visual culture, meanwhile, can be useful for giving insight into wider social, political, and cultural contexts.
 3. Find and *gather potential sources*.
 - Finding potential alternative “texts” can be somewhat daunting, especially as there is no single database that can be drawn on. However, there are a few different resources that can be used in this regard.
 - Resources such as [IMDb](#), [The Poetry Foundation](#), and [Goodreads](#) allow you to search for film, poetry, novels with thematic keywords. They also include curated lists of sources on specific subjects.
 - Numerous museums and galleries have web presences that include curatorial information on and high-quality images of their collections. These can be particularly helpful when they hold exhibitions on specific subjects linked to the themes of the courses you are teaching.
 - Relatedly, local and on-campus museums, galleries, archives, and libraries can be drawn on. Staff at these institutions are often eager to have students and classes engage with their collections and can be very helpful to pointing towards the possible sources.
 - Blogs and websites such as [The Duck of Minerva](#), [Good Authority](#), [The Disorder of Things](#), and [E-IR](#), run their own podcasts and/or include lists of podcasts on political science and IR, and/or curate lists of music on political subjects.
 - There are a number of content creators who also make content and video essays on global politics and politically adjacent topics, such as [Philosophy Tube](#) whose work can be used.
 - Finally, drawing on and gaining inspiration from scholars who have worked on engaged art and culture in global politics, for example as part of the [aesthetic turn in IR](#), can be way of both finding potential sources and learning how to analyze them.
 4. Narrow down and *select the specific source(s)* to be used.
 - In selecting specific sources to be brought into the classroom and/or placed on the syllabus consider what specifically you want students to take away from the source and how you’d like them to engage with it, and how the source facilitates this.
 - Depending on the source, this might require doing some legwork ahead of time and directing students as to how they should engage the source and what they should be looking for when they engage with it.

Examples

- Works of postcolonial literature, such as Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* can be used to give students a more human understanding of the effects of colonialism. Although Achebe’s novel

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is a work of fiction and focuses on a single experience, engaging with this text provides students with a deeper understanding of the experience of colonialism—something that can sometimes be missing from more scholarly discussions of the topic. In discussing the novel, we don't just focus on the content of Achebe's narrative, but also what we can learn from engaging with works of fiction and how fiction might help us fill in the gaps in the archive.

- Using paintings and other works of artistic and cultural production—such as painted Greco-Roman statues or Orientalist paintings, etc.—to help illustrate historical shifts in understandings of the Self and Other that in some ways mirror changes in the structures and organization of global politics.¹
- “Reading” Indigenous wampum belts to explore alternative diplomatic and treaty-making practices.²

Final Projects

A final way of encouraging students to engage with alternative sources, perspectives, and forms of knowledge is through open-ended final projects. These projects open-ended in terms of both content and form, and allow students to explore a topic connected to the themes of the course that is of interest to them through a medium that they feel comfortable in. Not only can these projects give students an opportunity to explore alternative ways of communicating information and knowledge—building on previous engagements with alternative “texts”—but they are also designed to be inclusive of multiple and differing learning styles, backgrounds, experiences, and accessibility needs. Students are thus actively encouraged to draw on and make use of the skills they already possess and/or are developing. Such final projects are best used in smaller, upper-level seminar courses where students have more time to explore a topic and work independently, where instructors can provide more tailored guidance and supervision, and where the aim is for students to apply their learning and the concepts and tools covered in class.

These final projects are composed of three parts: a final project outline, the final project itself, and an in-class presentation.

- The *outline* encourages students to start thinking about and working on the project earlier in the term and provides instructors with an opportunity to provide students with some initial feedback and guidance. Additionally, as the project is open-ended in both content and form, it allows instructors to make sure that students are putting in a similar and consistent amount of work, and suggest changes if needed to ensure that the assignment is equitable. The outline, in this sense, can be approached as a project proposal.
- The *final project* itself makes up the bulk of the assignment. Although it is open in both form and content, students are still expected to do research for it and make some sort of argument and/or intervention. Where the project is more creative or artistic, students are also expected to include a preface or foreword that frames and explains the project, clarifies the intervention that the project is making and helps instructors gauge the work that went into.
- Final project *presentations* are held in the final class meeting. This meeting functions as a kind of workshop for the final projects. Students each spend five to ten minutes presenting their

¹ See Talbot, Margaret. 2018. ‘The Myth of Whiteness in Classical Sculpture’. *The New Yorker*, 22 October 2018. <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2018/10/29/the-myth-of-whiteness-in-classical-sculpture>; Said, Edward W. (1978) 2003. *Orientalism*. New York: Vintage Books.

² See King, Hayden. 2018. ‘Discourses of Conquest and Resistance: International Relations & Anishinaabe Diplomacy’. In *Race, Gender, and Culture in International Relations: Postcolonial Perspectives*, edited by Randolph Persaud and Alina Sajed, 135–54. London: Routledge.

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projects, explaining their topic, the medium they chose, and the intervention they are making. These presentations are followed by a few minutes of Q&A that students can potentially use to improve and develop their projects before final submissions. These presentations are likewise useful for instructors to get a better sense of the projects themselves, the work that the student put into it, and how it engages with the themes and materials of the course.

In terms of evaluation, a more holistic approach is required. As such, these projects are evaluated with an eye to the work and effort put into creating it, how it engages the themes and materials of the course, and how well it successfully demonstrates an attempt on the part of the student to apply their learning from the course to their chosen topic and in their chosen medium.

Sample assignment sheet

Details:

- The final assignment for this course is a final project. The purpose of the final project is for you to critically explore a topic or issue related to the themes and content of the course that is of interest to you through a diverse array of methods, approaches, perspectives, and materials.
- The form that the final project takes is left up to you—it could be research paper, a piece of creative (non-)fiction or journalistic writing, a zine, a photo essay, a recorded talk, or some other form of creative expression—so long it demonstrates close and thoughtful engagement with the themes of the course, you are able to articulate how it does so by drawing on class materials and discussions, and you put a reasonable amount of work into it.

Instructions:

- Outline
 - The outline should provide an overview of your final project, including the issue or topic that you wish to explore, the materials and sources that you plan on engaging with, a brief discussion of the form that your final project will take, and the potential claims, arguments, and/or interventions that you plan to make.
 - The outline should be 2-3 pages, double-spaced and include a bibliography of at least five sources that you plan to engage with in your project (at least two of which are not assigned course materials).
- Final Project
 - The final project should include an argument and/or intervention in relation to the topic and/or issue you are writing on.
 - Regardless of the choice you make, the project should make use of the various themes, approaches, perspectives, and concepts that we have discussed in class, and clearly show how these are used.
 - The project should be roughly equivalent in terms of work and effort to an 8-10 page, double-spaced research paper.
 - If your project is in the form of a piece of creative expression, please include a one-page, single-spaced preface or foreword that frames the project and details how it connects to the themes of the course.
 - The project should include a bibliography of the sources you drew on in putting it together.
- Presentation
 - In our final class meeting you will be asked to briefly present your final project.
 - Presentations should be about five to ten minutes each, and should discuss your choice of topic and format, some of the arguments and/or interventions your project makes,

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and highlight connections to the themes, topics, and materials discussed over the course of the semester.

- Presentations will be followed by a brief Q&A from your classmates and the instructor.
- These presentations are not graded, but provide you an opportunity to receive some feedback on your project in a low-stakes environment before you submit it.

Assessment:

- Outline
 - Does the outline include everything that was asked for in the instructions?
 - Is there a clear plan for addressing the topic/issue?
 - Is there a bibliography of at least five sources, two of which are outside sources, and are the sources appropriate?
 - Is there an outline of an argument or intervention?
- Final Project
 - Does the project adequately explore the topic/issue chosen?
 - Does the project make an argument or intervention, and is that supported by evidence?
 - Does the project make clear and effective use of the materials, concepts, ideas, etc. covered in class?
 - Does it show clear engagement with the topics and themes of the class and an attempt to applying your learning?
 - Does the project include a bibliography of works cited/used and does it draw on appropriate outside sources?