Inclusiveness, Pedagogy, Identity, Ideology, and the Epistemology of the Professor

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My home state of Florida has been undergoing a number of controversial changes in its approach to teaching and education. As someone who is just right of center, I tend to agree with many of the changes for various reasons, which may become apparent below. I prepared the following statement for my students regarding inclusiveness; pedagogy; identity politics; my own identity, ideology, and/or epistemological approach(es) to the social sciences; as well as how and why we might address some controversial questions regarding which many people, otherwise, may not want to know. The language uses first-person, singular, to reduce formality and to provide students with oft-sought and seldom delivered information regarding their professor's pedagogical and epistemological processes.

Because of the (sometimes controversial) topics that I teach, it has relieved tensions for students to know, rather than not to know, who their professor is at least to that degree. Public trust in faculty does not appear to be particularly high, and attendance at universities is declining, nationally. Attendance at Florida colleges and universities appears to be stable but wobbled, somewhat, with the Covid-19 lockdowns. Still, even accounting for Covid-19, given population growth, the national-level decline is notable and unsettling. While some lack of trust may result from political discourses that do not value their faculty as (a form of) civil servants – particularly if one teaches at a state university – some of it might possibly be ameliorated by allowing students (and the public) to know their faculty better in intellectual and cultural terms. As a heterogeneous state, we come from a wide range of cultures once expanding out from the basic civic culture and social contract that we all share. The statement below addresses the students as novices, but also as potential *intellectual-equals-in-training* that can be made better through the studies and training that they do during their university time and with their university faculty. They are, after all, our next generation of leaders in just about all areas, themes, topics, and professions.

Notes on inclusiveness and pedagogy

Men's and women's voices, and voices from every religion, ethnicity, race, etc., are welcomed in my classroom. Students from urban and rural backgrounds are welcomed. Overseas students are welcomed. All students are welcomed.

There is no political litmus test in my classroom. All participants (students, faculty, and/or any guest speakers) in my classes are asked and expected to be respectful to one another during discussions and other class exercises, remembering that your student body includes intelligent people of vastly ranging political, religious, social, and other opinions, subject positions, and epistemological frameworks. Discourse in this class is expected to cover a wide range of views and subject positions in a way that is civil at all times. We will practice how to do so in class. Sometimes it is hard work. Every effort will be made to avoid ethnic or racial bias in the classroom discussions in regard to any perceived or real *majority or minority* community; or any perceived (as "dominating" or "hegemonic") or real religion, gender, or other group identity. Your cooperation in this effort will be greatly appreciated!

No person in my classroom was involved in historical events (such as colonialism) that have been interpreted by some scholars to have had deleterious effects upon one group/community or another; we may study those, or equally controversial arguments, *as scholarly arguments*; but it does not in any way imply guilt or responsibility on the part of

a living ethnic or racial community represented in my classroom. In our research in the field, scholars of comparative politics encounter some things that *no one* wants to see or to think about; and we see many uplifting and wonderful phenomena. You will never hear about most of it. Some western scholars have made a point of having certain scholarship and arguments published in western languages, either from overseas or domestic works, so that we will know the arguments that are out there. Why? Because those arguments, if left without any attention, can cause war and major conflict under some circumstances. So, we study these controversial arguments under the premise that we do better by knowing more. That is, knowledge empowers peacemakers and the forces of stability on all sides; and lack of knowledge can lead to significant destabilization in important locales, or even on a global scale (e.g., a "politics of the street," and other examples). An informed electorate is also better equipped to make decisions. We will, therefore, study some difficult issues that are controversial among some communities – such as religion and secularism. I tend to teach with a "glass is half full" approach even as we do so. Every effort will be made such that you will not be burdened by issues beyond scholarship. We also study some uplifting and encouraging themes and phenomena.

In my classroom, you are asked to practice respect for one another in your comments in class discussion regarding the readings; we will seek to avoid personal opinion, although we may include personal experience beginning at some point during the semester. You are each individual budding adults, scholars, and intellectuals and are asked to use your discretion in this scholarly endeavor. Likewise, you are not required to *believe* an argument from the professor or from the readings. You are asked in this class to be able to reproduce, analyze, and evaluate such arguments on their own terms; and you may be asked to compare, contrast, and to evaluate analytical merits among them. What you believe or ultimately decide to hold as your own analytical (value-neutral) or normative (value-related) opinion is wholly up to your own analytical and normative discretion. It is hoped that my courses will help you in your development of both the analytical skills to make such decisions about your own neutral-analytical and normative-valuative views, and to have increasing confidence in your own skills and ability to do so.

Note on identity

If you are a student who is interested in identity politics for whom it is important to know something regarding my own, you are welcomed to read the following. I receive many questions regarding my identity, and a sizable number of questions regarding my own politics and ideolog(ies). You can find some answers here, as I do not usually talk about it in class. It may stem from the topics that I teach, which include but are not limited to Jewish Studies, Islamic Studies, Middle East and North Africa politics, and Israel politics; some number of people want to know where I am coming from — geographically and ideologically. It may stem from phenotype – many students notice that I have, naturally, dark olive-green eyes and medium-to-light brown hair. It is a relatively unusual combination in the U.S. It took many years of study and travel for me to know some of the regions in which those phenotypic traits are common: Central and East Asia, some parts of Russia, Germany, Poland, southern Europe, and South America. I spent most of my youth growing up with one side of my family rather than the other, so I have had to learn by study over time perhaps more than most the origins of some of my own basic genealogical traits. I grew up in a rather rarified, almost, but not quite secluded, existence in the remote country learning classical piano; reading various classical literatures (e.g., fiction, biographies, and travelogues); and learning equestrian and animal husbandry (in addition to many traditional "women's" duties, such as baking, sewing, knitting, embroidery, and a bit of crocheting). The benefit of (relative) seclusion was a somewhat classical European education, development of certain skills, and the life of the mind; the drawback was, of course, less time with family and friends.

Many people assume that I am Jewish because of my professional work; I receive anti-Semitic quips periodically. Others assume that I am Muslim or Palestinian because of my professional work; I receive those quips as well. I have been studying Jewish Studies since I was 19 years old, and Islamic Studies since I was 20 years old, so I have heard such periodically throughout my adult life. But I am, myself, none of the above; although I do have first, second, and more distant family cousin ties to both religions – and to most of the major world religions, including various forms of Christianity, as well as religions more remote to us here in the U.S., such as Shinto. I am American, born in Alaska after it became a state. I practice an Asian form of Buddhism (a moderate Orthodoxy). I was born Roman Catholic and of Eurasian origins with ties to the Philippines; Spain; Prussia (e.g., Russia, Poland, and Germany); Ireland; and Holland. I have cousins amongst the Arctic Asian peoples, both "*asiatique*" and Prussian. In

that sense, I consider myself Eurasian and *asiatique* (*asiatique* is a French term referring to Asiatic peoples, which can mean both Asian and Eurasian depending upon context, ranging the Arctic north of Asia & Europe, primarily, but also including Arctic Alaska, Canada, and other areas). I spent part of a summer as a small child in a coastal Inuit village in Alaska, where we lived in Inuit furs by ice fishing; and I saw polar bears and whales from a kayak. I have traveled and lived on several continents. More details on all of it and how it relates to my teaching; pedagogy (teaching models that I follow); and epistemology (my thinking regarding certain aspects of Knowledge, and what is knowable) below.

Like most people, I am proud of my identity and am happy to provide certain information in regard to it. Students are not required to share their identities in my classroom. In class, I make a concerted effort to let you know when I am providing my own view of a thematic course issue (as grounded in the literatures that we read, and others, on that topic); and when I am outlining views from the literature, *per se*. I lean toward the latter in terms of what I provide most often. In comparative politics, we seek to leave out the normative most of the time, as someone needs to be able to provide information that is as clean of personal normative assumptions and biases as possible. So, students may only rarely hear about my own normative positions in class. You can see some of my own normative starting points below.

Notes on ideology, and the epistemology of the professor

I have lived in western cities and in remote rural areas, and in both cities and rural areas of developed and developing countries. As mentioned, I grew up involved in animal husbandry; classical piano; and a fair bit of readings in English, American, and a few European literary classics in translation (Russian, Spanish, French, a few Latin American classics, as well as one Polish classic *[Pad Tadeusz],* and one classic in Philippine nationalism *[Noli Mi Tangere*]).

I approach social science as an ongoing effort to bring together human, social, and political themes and research questions into the framework of the scientific method. I am a neo-positivist, meaning that I still accept that there is a material world that is "out there" – regardless of our presence or observation of it (e.g., the tree falls in the forest whether we are there to see it, or not). In this neo-positive world that is "out there" regardless of ourselves, there is a "Truth" (or, in some cases, at least multiple truths) that we can go out into the world, find, and observe. In that way, I am influenced by positive analysis and the effort to engage in causal inquiry (e.g., What, *a,* caused, *b,* in the socio-political world?).

What is "positive" about "positive" analysis is a clear link between analytical components of the argument such that an argument – as a whole or by components – is falsifiable. Another scholar can go out into the same world, observe, and say that we were right, or that we were wrong, in our argument. The "neo" in neo-positive means, likewise, that I am influenced by the post-modernist admonition to be *more modest* regarding those concepts / notions / phenomena to which we ascribe the elevated notion of Truth (without relinquishing the concept of truth altogether). But I do not believe in relativism as taken to the extreme by which there is no longer any truth, and all fields, themes, and human phenomena are thrown to randomness, anarchy, or to so many truths as to hold the concept of truth no longer meaningful (and the human world, thereby, un-knowable in any scholarly and/or scientific terms).

In the late-19th century, "Truth" in the social sciences was often associated with notions of primitiveness, superiority, and an assigning of different communities, peoples, and places to relative positions between those two poles; Truth in the sciences had, sometimes, scary implications, long since debunked to my knowledge, as found in the Eugenics movement of that day, etc.

With that in mind, I subscribe to a modified and hopefully "more modest" notion of truth, without which there is no material world to observe. In this type of framework, we look for *patterns*, *processes*, and competing truths (and/or narratives), seeking to find an analytical link between each competing truth (and/or narrative), a range of demographic and/or ideological components, and specific parts of a political argument or phenomenon. Analytically, it is the best that we can do.

The linking of the social science argument that comes out of this type of research with social theories, already present, leads to increased Knowledge over time (see, for example, Yin 2003: 28-33). Increasing (responsible and ethically-derived) Knowledge, as I understand it, is the first goal of scholarship. In that way, my work is not normative (e.g., taking one ideology or another regarding a research theme) but is deeply impressed by the effort to remain – even with such qualitative tools and data – within the scientific method.

I do have my own ideologies, and they tend toward simple value of all human life and cultural pluralism (but not relativism – for me, it stops at certain types of human rights violations, or, in religion, ritual practices involving certain types of violence against others). I try to keep anything else out of my scholarship. While in no way a sociological expert on him, in terms of applying social theory to the material themes in comparative politics, I am a Durkheimian to the core (e.g., culture drives human societies, economies, politics, and history, etc., and social solidarity matters or we end with anomie), and influenced by Pierre Bourdieu, Jacques Derrida, Clifford Geertz, Irving Goffman, Victor Turner, and others in their observations and theories regarding relationships between power; words, symbols, and narratives; performativity; and human ritual.

I am influenced by Max Weber, Samuel Huntington, and Michael Mann in an interest in *effective, rational, systematic bureaucracy*, and that it be held in the hands of democratically-or participatory-governance-oriented persons rather than their antithesis (e.g., Mann – and Hannah Arendt – show us quite well, I believe, that bureaucratic institutions are normatively neutral and may be used for great good or great evil depending upon who is holding their reins) (see Mann 2003, 60; Mann 1986, 26; and Arendt 2006). I like to tell my students that, having lived in both democratic regimes and dictatorships, effective, rational, systematic bureaucracy is a Beauty (in terms of Virtues) that we should not take for granted (for example, obtaining and renewing one's driver's license with simple, systematic fees, lines, and rational-bureaucratic order; not needing special permissions to travel from one city or town to another; and passports and travel visas on a rational, non-personalist basis with no need for "connections" or "*protectsia*"). To the extent that we are able to live in such conditions, we should be – reasonably and rightfully – very proud. It means that, as individuals and communities, we are making (in my view) great choices regarding the personal self-restraint required to create and maintain a democratic social order. War and conflict often mitigate against such systematic, bureaucratic freedoms (although, if we are speaking about my own normative positions, on rare occasion, war may be correct and necessary). I believe in *individual* rights as against both state and community (in that way, I tend toward the right-of-center and Liberal rather than the communitarian, although I can appreciate communitarian arguments); popular sovereignty; political representation; and the consent of the (wide set of communities of the) governed.

If we are going to talk about Marx, that great purveyor – and object – of Cold War suspicions, I would want to talk about him in terms of Trotsky's read of him (ongoing "revolutionary" democracy, e.g., social democracy, as in Scandinavia or in Israel) (see Hoidal 2013); not Lenin's or Stalin's read of him, which I see as invalid in their emphasis on extreme centralized state authority in the hands of the few also called *étatism* (for example, Lovell does not see Trotsky as entirely freedom loving but he, nonetheless, casts doubt on Lenin's interpretation of Marx regarding authoritarianism, see Lovell 1984; and Marx 2005, where Marx lambastes the authority of the new post-revolutionary, centralized state). But I am not a Marxist. I am a culturalist. They are opposing sociological positions and frameworks for understanding the human world. I have great appreciation for Marx's sociological work as a (and perhaps the first ever) political ethnographer of labor and factories in the industrialization period (see Marx 2004, especially chapters 10 and 15). But I am a moderate libertarian and a culturalist.

Marx shares with some classical Liberals (such as David Ricardo) and Neoliberals the assumption that economics drives human societies, cultures, politics, and history (see Wallerstein 2004). That is, they are part of the same ballpark (or sociological-theoretical domain) in terms of social theory frameworks for understanding causal relationships in human societies. I am with Durkheim, and sometimes I am also with Max Weber (e.g., rationalized, merit-based bureaucracy; ideas and culture as driving economic institutions, etc.). It should be noted that both Marx and Durkheim were, nonetheless, structuralists; but that is at a higher level of generalization. They were structuralists with opposing ideas about what structures human life: economics and culture, respectively.

I teach some whole courses on religion and politics in various national or regional contexts, or in broad comparative

terms. And I often teach course segments related to religion and politics. Thus, I tend to teach my courses under the assumption that many forms of non-western and religious epistemologies are equally valid to western and non-religious epistemologies (indeed, religious epistemologies are natural in the west as well); and under the premise that their own cultural epistemologies are very important to peoples around the world (including ourselves). In addition, the U.S. includes many types of epistemologies among our peoples, many of which are influenced by non-western epistemologies and cultural systems; to my understanding, that is part of what it means to be a melting pot. Personally, I tend toward the former (e.g., religious epistemologies) in, at the least, a sympathetic approach as outlined by Religion scholar, Wilfred Cantwell Smith (Smith 1984); although I like the freedom that some forms of secularism bring in terms of freedom of thought and expression (noting that some forms of secularism can be totalitarian, such as national socialism). Wilfred Cantwell Smith's approach aids in researching and teaching topics in religion and politics for obvious reasons, and, also in other courses that address multiple cultural sources, communities, histories, identities, conflicts, construction of institutions, and other politics. Likewise, I will sometimes highlight instances in which religious vs. secular epistemologies (or other sorts of epistemologies) come into play, or into conflict, relating to a given theme, topic, or event that we are studying in this class.

A few pointers regarding academic training

If I were to frame my experience in terms of advice, I would say, college is your opportunity to train yourself broadly for your professional work as well as for life. There is time to take courses such as music or art (if they are not your major) if you start organizing your ideas about your own training from year one. Likewise, university is a unique opportunity as a concentrated period of study. You can get on-the-job training later in life, but it is apt to be infrequent over time. Make the most of the opportunity by organizing your ideas about courses as soon as possible (and in an ongoing way, since some courses are not always available). Train yourself broadly in choosing your classes in terms of methods, experiential learning, and skills development; and with focus in terms of topical and thematic center. That is, there is always a balance to be had between breadth and depth. If you are in Political Science, there is a lot of room in our major to develop a balance between the two. You can also double-major to expand your areas of training. In addition, I would encourage students not to underestimate the power of a student job in your training. A university is an exceptional locus of opportunities for extra and important training in student jobs, which exist across campus in clerical and entry-level positions in departments, libraries, centers, schools, museums or galleries, and other programs. You can get entry-level type of on-the-job training in those jobs, which may come in handy – or even be critical – down the road in your studies and/or professional work.

And, finally, in terms of life preparation (as well as preparation for good studying), I would say, learn to type and learn to cook. No matter what anyone may tell you, typing speed and precision matters to life success in a world of computers. Similarly, if you do not know how to cook already, take a gourmet cooking class – or, better yet, three (I recommend one on how to cook with eggs, one on baking, and one on holiday meals). If you are interested in international or cross-cultural questions, take international cooking classes while you are on campus. In the spirit of keeping it simple, and thinking in terms of the political economy of daily life, cooking for yourself and others is a great cost saving measure in addition to providing you with sustenance that supports excellence in training and in studying. Strive to enjoy yourself and develop your own inner calm even while you increase your intellectual prowess and professional efficiencies.

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