

Opinion – Transgressive Pedagogy in International Studies: A European Case Study

Written by Bart Sebastiaan Gabriel

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BART SEBASTIAAN GABRIEL, JUN 12 2024

In 2022, I had the pleasure of attending the European International Studies Association's (EISA) annual conference held at Panteion University in Athens, Greece. The EISA encompasses and convenes some of the most interesting and theoretically innovative work that I have had the pleasure of reading. Exemplified by pieces such as the special issue of the *European Journal of International Relations* on 'The End of International Relations Theory?' and the importance of contesting a theoretical canon, there are clearly ontological and epistemological debates occurring within the European international relations space that have the capacity to push the discipline as a whole forward.

Unfortunately, it seems that most of this conversation is happening in the realm of research itself or from a rostrum intent on addressing a research-centric community of scholars. This insularity limits the broader impact these theoretical innovations could have, particularly in the realm of pedagogy. There is a pressing need to bridge the gap between research and teaching, to bring these transgressive and critical perspectives into the classroom, and into the minds of scholars.

I bring this up to introduce a fundamental tension that a personal experience of mine revealed about the current state of the European international relations community and the work still to be done. Arguably, Europe has always been a region typified by poorly defined man-made borders that constantly shift in rough cadence with Western European ideals about what European identity entails (Delanty 1995). A recent example of this is the post-Second World War establishment of the European Coal and Steel Community, which originally included only a fraction of the states that now constitute the bulk of continental Europe and the European Union. It is also instructively outlined by the interstitial character of borderlands like Italy, Turkey, and certainly Greece.

Historically, Greece has borne the brunt of the throughput of human culture, conflict, and line-drawing exercises instigated or otherwise intensified by actors more Occidental than itself. Especially since 2011, when the aftermath of the Arab Spring destabilized a host of West Asian societies and mobilized vast streams of refugees, southern and eastern European borderlands such as Italy, Greece, and Turkey have borne the majority of the humanitarian responsibility, despite a marked discrepancy in socioeconomic resources. The migration experience in Greece is harsh, where paths to citizenship are difficult to traverse and gaps between migrant and native populations continue to widen (Cavounidis 2018). It is, therefore, not a surprise that the students of Panteion University took the opportunity presented by the plenary session to make their case about the ramifications of this ongoing humanitarian catastrophe along the Mediterranean coast.

To my recollection, about 250 of my colleagues, as well as the executive committee of the European International Studies Association, gathered for this plenary session to discuss imaginaries of the future and the political stakes of studying these imaginaries. This discussion was undoubtedly in response to mounting nihilism about the future in the face of ever-intensifying conflict, climate catastrophe, and the recent pandemic, which equally revealed the political order's inability to adequately and decisively reckon with persistent global developmental fault lines. These fault lines typically force the dispossessed to carry a disproportionate share of the responsibility for addressing global crises.

The proceedings of this plenary session were disrupted when a group of student activists broke into the hall where

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the session was taking place. They handed out pamphlets, unfurled banners, and took the floor. Two or three student speakers explained, in no uncertain terms, that while the municipality of Athens and its mayor, in collaboration with Panteion University, had curated the academic visitors' experience of the city by inviting members of leadership positions and the executive committee of the European International Studies Association to dinners and walking tours through various gentrified areas of the city, the students' lived experience in Athens was quite different. For the students, Athens was more than a neatly demarcated municipality; it included a sizeable refugee camp positioned on the outskirts of the city, sequestered away from the foreign eyes of those arriving via the ferry port for leisure or flying into Athens airport. Their requests were simple: recognize what is going on here, recognize the curated reality you are confronted with when your sightseeing decisions are outsourced to those in power. The immediate pretext for this direct action were reports of extra-judicial killings that had taken place and which the local government of Athens had kept away from public scrutiny.

Overall, this was a moment wherein my colleagues and I were exposed to information that we could not have reasonably obtained otherwise. Our primary function, the primary reason for being in Athens, was to discuss the state of our work and the state of the world with our colleagues within the hallowed halls of the academy. It was not a conversation with the city of Athens, with its people, its infrastructure, or its geopolitical and socioeconomic entanglements. Certainly not a conversation with its borderwork (Rumford 2009). The intent of this conference was the temporary creation of a plastic environment, so intensely abstracted away from the real world with all of its messiness, to allow for a constructive, meaningful, and focused conversation about global affairs. The interruption regrounded the conference, if only for a brief moment. I do not believe they were present for more than 20 minutes before campus security showed up and the students voluntarily agreed to vacate the premises. But in those 20 minutes, something interesting happened, which, for me personally, serves as a reminder of the importance and stakes of pedagogy, and the lack of a broadly cultivated critical receptiveness that persists in contemporary International Relations.

I say this because among the attendees of this plenary session were well-established members of different sub-branches of international relations, notably foreign policy analysts, political economists, political sociologists, popular culture studies experts, and security studies experts, among others. When student protestors/pedagogues started speaking, there was a very clear response from the loudest voices in the audience. To my recollection, these voices did not originate from marginalized interlocutors. Instead, it came across as the disembodied yet personified hegemonic discourse of the discipline materializing in that very moment. The response to the students' disruption boiled down to, "Unfortunately, there is an inherent existential risk to taking on the identity of a refugee, which, while tragic, is a multi-productive category to interrogate for our community. The sooner we can return to our program, the faster we can actually be of use." This statement, while not subtle, clearly communicated a disinterest in unexpected encounters with the international or even the political. It seemed to stem from a notion that all categories are abstractable, universalisable and can therefore be sanitized away from the political consideration of the hegemonic researcher. It appeared as the operation of the coloniality of power (Quijano 2007).

What can we learn from this encounter? In her magisterial book "Teaching to Transgress," bell hooks describes the process of teaching, especially in higher education, as the act of dialogic engagement wherein instructors are necessarily morally and personally implicated in the conduct of their craft—their craft being teaching, not research. (Hooks 2014) This is a far cry from the research-centric culture that dominates international relations, as well as many other disciplines within the neoliberal university. It is not only that this structure of incentives for career advancement privileges only particular modalities of academic labor; it is that this inculcates or socializes practitioners of the discipline, whether academic or outside, into a mode of operating that fundamentally discounts the educational aspect of higher education itself (Boyer 1990).

Bell hooks goes on to argue for the importance of an engaged pedagogy, meaning not only a dialogic engagement with the student but also a truthful engagement with the world and its inherent structural inequities. She draws from Paulo Freire's "Pedagogy of the Oppressed," where Freire posits that there is no such thing as a human outside of an already ongoing situation, meaning that the purpose of education is to instill critical consciousness into students – *conscientização* (Freire 2000). This kind of conscientization requires a commitment on the part of the instructor to view the social world they inhabit as another non-discrete part of the global political and social continuum in which we

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all live our lives; this includes the classroom. Even if the power of a teacher is far too limited to directly override students' perspectives, ideas or lived experiences, there is still an intrinsic value to the pedagogical encounter itself (Inayatullah 2022).

It is a move towards the social/symbolic that, in the area of research, has already been accomplished, as signified by Robert Cox's seminal notion "always for something and some purpose," (Cox 1981) complemented by the inter-paradigm wars following the end of the Cold War and subsequent fractionalization of the discipline. There have been many calls for pluralism inside the academy's published discipline, which I welcome and whose voices deserve to be amplified. However, simultaneously, many of these considerations still limit the most serious facets of academic identity to being a researcher and perhaps a policy practitioner. Considerations of the social and pedagogical aspects of the job, where the vast majority of academics will exercise the majority of their discursive power by virtue of the disproportionate size of the student body they will educate as compared to the peers that will read and cite their work, remain downplayed (Newell and Stavrianakis 2017). It is important to move beyond consideration of teaching as a chore, and towards a critical pedagogy that underscores the significant pre-structuring power in policy that well-educated International Relations graduates can bring to the international stage (Hagmann and Biersteker 2014).

I consider this particular instance to be something of a stock-taking moment by virtue of the number of our colleagues gathered in one place, as well as the stature of the annual European International Studies Association conference. It's clear that the clarion calls to pluralism would benefit from a more holistic consideration of academic identity. I'd like to argue that if and when pedagogical opportunities present themselves, we ought to be ready for them. This means not only within the research niche in which one might be socialized, but also in interactions with students, especially during times of mounting polarization, when intellectual freedom at universities is actively threatened, and student populations around the world are increasingly, frequently, and violently repressed. Times like these make clear the social and political stakes of the pedagogical project, as well as the over-abundance of pedagogical encounters already readily present in the world that we navigate. These are transgressive times, and they call for a transgressive pedagogy. We must be ready to teach transgressively, and we must be ready to be taught transgressively, for the benefit of our discipline, our students, and ourselves.

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