Critical Pedagogy for the Present Moment: Learning from the Avant-Garde to Teach Globalization from Experiences

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Closer to us in what it integrates and in its consequences, global politics still gets conceptualized as if it belonged to a realm of its own, disembedded and abstracted beyond quotidian experiences of power. Still folded in a supernatural world that cannot be of their making, as far from experience as their cold war predecessors were, international studies (IS) students are as alienated and find it as hard to work with critical imagination.

To teach students to be more than mere technicians of whatever new world order may be born of present circumstances, we have to unmake the political separation that still exists between the study and teaching of global politics and everyday life in the world economy.

This article presents a record of a decade-long teaching experiment conducted in the department of political science at Laval University in Québec City. Borrowing techniques and inspiration from the “historical avant-garde,” I have worked to reinvent my pedagogical practice to create “situations” in which students can be full, unalienated subjects in the learning process.

“The sociological imagination … in considerable part consists of the capacity to shift from one perspective to another, and in the process to build up an adequate view of a total society and of its components. It is this imagination … that sets off the social scientist from the mere technician.”

(Mills, 1959:211)

Until the end of the cold war, the academic discipline of international relations (IR) was almost exclusively concerned with the doings of assumedly rational statesmen, soldiers, and diplomats pursuing invariable interests in a world of their own making, absolutely severed from the ordinary contingencies of everyday life. Centered on abstract supermen making contextless histories, IR science was as reified as could be and its teaching as alienating. This made it difficult, if not impossible, for students to connect their lives to global processes of order and change, and thus acquire the means to “shift from one perspective to another … from the most impersonal and remote transformations to the most intimate features of the human self” (Mills, 1959). Absolutely detached from circumstantial life, how could IR students develop the imagination necessary to build up a critical

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view of the world, except perhaps through a chanced encounter with a professor who included the likes of E. P. Thompson (Thompson, 1982), Immanuel Wallerstein (Wallerstein, 1980; 1980 [1974]) or Maria Mies (Mies, 1986) on their list of recommended readings, very much against the grain of his or her profession.

In the past two decades, radical transformations in the world political economy have forced a loosening up of the established IR curricula, to the point where many now situate themselves, almost ecumenically, in relation to a field (and not a discipline) they call “international,” or “global,” or “transnational” studies (Amoore and Langley, 2001). \(^1\) In the age of the “new world order” and “global governance,” nonstate and trans-state actors and rationalities are now studied as matters of fact, and a host of quotidian issues, challenges, and problems “that go beyond the capacities of states to address individually” (population control, human rights, human security, acid rain, etc.) are routinely broached in ways that appear to reconnect world orders to everyday life (Scott, 2001). \(^2\) No longer “out there” but close to us (Amoore and Langley, 2001), the field of international studies (IS) is, in many ways, less reified as a whole than the discipline of IR was.

From a political point of view, however, the undeniable opening on to lived issues that has accompanied the broadening of IR into IS has not undone the separation in kind that was assumed to exist between the making of world orders and circumstantial life. Closer to us in what it integrates and in its consequences, global politics still gets conceptualized as if it belonged to a realm of its own, disembedded and abstracted beyond quotidian (thus specific, relational, and contingent) relationships of power.

To teach students to be more than mere technicians of whatever new world order may be born of present circumstances, we have to unmake the political separation that still exists between the study and teaching of global politics and everyday life in the world economy.

Reconnecting learning to everyday life, of course, is the broad project of all critical pedagogies, from Henri Laborit’s to Paulo Freire’s (Freire, 1973; 1987; 1996 [1970]) to H.A. Giroux’s (Giroux, 1988; 1992) to poststructuralist feminism (Belenky, 1986; Lather, 1991; 1994) to more recent “active-learning” approaches (Bonwell and Sullivan, 1996; Lantis, Kuzma, and Boehrer, 2000). We who desire to teach global social and power relations in a less alienating manner can certainly draw a wealth of techniques from those traditions. To encourage critical engagement in our students, we can also dig into Mills’s bag of tricks (chatting with people, setting up files, keeping a journal, looking up synonyms in the dictionary, letting our “mind become a moving prism catching light from as many angles as possible”), simulate island castaway games, show popular films to deconstruct theory as discourse (Weber, 2001), play croquet matches to help students “comprehend [...] systemic theories of International Relations” (Duffy, 2001:386), or encourage ‘Battles of Seattle’ discussions to “encourage students to discover the theoretical problematic of IPE for themselves” (Amoore and Langley, 2001).

Present circumstances, though, demand more of us than tricks. We teach global politics in an absolutely crucial juncture when most political actors and movements—whether they are working to reproduce the current world order, to reform or revolutionize it—interpellate us, insistently, as members of an abstract community of one sort or another (“global civil society,” “the women,” “the poor,” “the people,” or “the stakeholders” of the world). Let us call this a cosmopolitan concord, or “humanitarian ideology” (Hours, 1998), and let us see that it is interfering (in Ira Shor’s sense of the term) with critical thinking in our classrooms. Closer than ever to us, the world has become still more clouded: as human

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1 On this, see also Baylis and Smith (1997).

2 The quote is from Gordenker and Weiss’s definition of “global governance” (Gordenker and Weiss, 1996:17).
experience becomes planetwide (Melucci, 1995), what we study and teach is not
global politics at all, but its aura.

In this context, adding new tricks to our teaching might even bring students
further away from being full subjects in the learning process. Web-based and new
media teaching (Kellner, 2000), global problem-solving sessions (“what to do with
the global Aids crisis, how to address women’s rights around the world, how to
prevent or halt an ethnic conflict, and what to do to promote progress in the Global
South . . .”3), films, fields trips and overseas semesters, for instance, rather immerse
students in the fantastic world of cosmopolitan ideology than they give them a real
chance to shift perspective to build up a total, unalienated, view of the world and of
its components.4 Hurling principled manifestos at our students is no way to
dissipate ghosts and help students become whole in learning.5 Replacing one
alienating order by another does not help bridge the gap between what gets taught
and what students live and know (what Gramsci would have called social instinct
developed “through daily experiences illuminated by common sense”). To bring
the world into critical purview, we have to think more deliberately, and more
radically, about our pedagogical practices.

What follows is a record of a decade-long teaching experiment conducted in the
department of political science at Laval University in Québec city. Borrowing
techniques and inspiration from the “historical avant-garde” (Bürger, 1984), I have
worked, first intuitively then increasingly deliberately, toward reinventing my
pedagogical practice to fight absence and alienation in the new world order (that,
need it be emphasized, includes what gets studied and taught in universities), and
create “situations” in which students can be full subjects in the learning process.6

International Studies in an Alienating Moment

Neoliberalism was made in the world economy, in a manner that was relatively
autonomous from happenings at the national level. In the mid-1970s, the first
neoliberal initiatives appeared in core regulatory agencies of the world economy, as
policy solutions to the protracted crisis of the Bretton Woods system. Steered by
globalizing élites meeting in exclusive, nearly clandestine, places whence the world
looks a leveled and bundled space rather than a contested site of social relations
(the World Economic Forum in Davos, the Trilateral Commission, etc.), global
neoliberalism in its beginnings was as uncompromising as a regime could be and
not in the least concerned with questions of social reproduction.

By the beginning of the 1980s, “no society” neoliberalism was already in crisis.
Monetarism, to take as an example the first and most radical framework for early
neoliberal economic policy, had already failed to provide any stability to post–
Bretton Woods monetary relations (as it had failed to stimulate productive

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3 The citation is from Scott, (2001).
4 On problem-solving pedagogy as alienating and on problem-posing as “affirm[ing] men and women as beings
in the process of becoming” see Freire (1996 [1970]):52-67.
5 Recent examples of such hurling include Steingard and Fitzgibbons (1995) and Parker (1997).
6 “Situation” is a loaded term. It refers to the end of, and the reason for work of the International Situationistes
(about which more later): total, unalienated experiences, synchronic moments of collective transcendence when
spectators shatter their alienating identification with shadowy heroes and false images of their collective selves, and
stand ready to become revolutionary agents. In Situationniste lore, “situations” are victories over the alienating ways
of the société du spectacle. They do not appear spontaneously and cannot be overdetermined entirely (which would
amount to replacing one spectacle by another), but must be constructed in a way that lets subjects find themselves.
On situations see Debord (1985) and Jappe (2001).
investments, reestablish rates of profit, or discipline social relations in Fordist countries at the core of the world economy), and had been abandoned as drastically and unilaterally as it had been adopted. Beyond monetary matters, “IMF riots” in Caracas, Warsaw, Buenos Aires, Abidjan, and Libreville exposed the political fragility of structural adjustment programs (Walton, 1987).

In this critical juncture, global regulatory agencies began to concern themselves with the political and social dimensions of structural adjustments. Ideas for “global human governance” that had begun appearing a decade earlier in organizations and policy bodies peripheral to the making of world order (the Brandt, Palme, Brundtland, and Nyerere Commissions, ECLA, UNCTAD, UNCLOS, UNESCO, etc.) began migrating toward core regulatory agencies (the World Bank et al.), where they were fused into what can only be thought of as a hegemonical project. Where “no society” neoliberalism was a “concept of control” that sought to combine “mutually compatible strategies in the field of labour relations, socio-economic policy and foreign policy on the basis of a [narrow] class compromise” (Overbeek, 1990), new ideas of “global governance” broadened global neoliberalism into a political design for a global social order.

At the core of “global governance” is an attempt to give neoliberalism a social basis of its own by assembling a multitiered civil society acceptable to globalizing elites. “Global governance,” then, is what Henri Lefebvre would have labeled a process of “integrative participation” (Lefebvre, 1968). To borrow from Althusser, we could call governance a process of “interpellation.”

Calling human beings forth as members of a specific society is a broad endeavor that necessarily involves many distinct, sometimes contradictory, processes. What social forces are to be integrated into the new order and how, who are necessary interlocutors, what is to be the autonomy and constitutive principles of the new society, what are the limits to inclusivity, and what is to be the part of coercion and that of consensus, are all matters crucial to the making of global governance that cannot begin to be broached here.

What can be said is this: roughly twenty years after it has begun, governance’s efforts at social-building has not yet begot a global civil society that can sustain global neoliberalism, though something like a nébuleuse, or a galaxy (Donini, 1995, 1996) of NGOs and other would-be representatives of global civil society has definitively begun taking shape. Relatively apart from this nébuleuse, another humanity has also begun gathering in various and sundry people’s summits (from the first women’s summit in Mexico in 1975 to the Zapatistas Encuentro Intercontinental por La Humanidad y contra el Neoliberalismo of 1994 and 1996 to the grand fêtes galantes in Porto Alegre).

Without presuming either that agencies of governance will indeed succeed in socializing global neoliberalism, or that “another world” will be made by the peoples of Seattle, Porto Alegre, and elsewhere, we can already observe that the World Bank et al. and those who organize against the ways and consequences of global neoliberalism have worked to the same effect in creating an ideological context for global politics. Rather than appearing as the activity of plural men and women that are rooted in material circumstances, global politics seems the thing of immaterial, synthetic beings. To borrow Arendt’s distinction, it seems that Man, not men, live on the earth (Arendt, 1998).

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Rather than question this context, IS tends to reproduce spectral figures of order and counterorder. I submit as a proposition that cosmopolitanism is the founding ideology of the field of international study.

To begin seeing clear into the relevant literature, we can adapt Robert Cox’s distinction between problem-solving theory that (“takes the world as it finds it, with the prevailing social and power relationships and the institutions into which they are organized, as the given framework for action”) and critical theory that (“stands apart from the prevailing order of the world and asks how that order came about”) (Cox, 1986). In the problem-solving literature, the separation between global politics and quotidian life rests on assumptions that global issues, challenges, and problems are kernels around which naturally coalesce purposeful units within which beaver away state and labor representatives, international emissaries, experts, and sundry NGOs (nongovernmental organizations), QUANGOs (quasi-nongovernmental organizations), GOINGOs (government-induced nongovernmental organizations), and others taken to be the “torch-bearers and stakeholders” of global civil society (Donini, 1995:83). Thus, where realism (IR’s founding paradigm) saw no politics at all beyond the rational pursuit of national interests, problem-solving IS does inquire into the world beyond interstate relations, only to find out that it is resolutely policy-minded, consensual, collaborative, orderly, and civic, the product of magically purposeful and still perfectly apolitical attempts “to bring more orderly and reliable responses” to global problems and issues (Gordenker and Weiss, 1996:17). Relationships of power that IR ignored, mainstream IS most often fails to conceptualize as politics at all.

In critical studies (often carried in continuity with analytical traditions that were peripheral to IR as a discipline), global power most often gets abstracted beyond any social relations and studied as a thing unto itself. Thus conceptualized, power is not an historic and contingent relationship but an object absolutely controlled by transcendental figures of order (globalizing elites, transnational capital, etc.) that could only ever be challenged by other holy ghosts (“counterhegemonic” and “antisystemic” movements are often invoked).

By unexamined concord, then, ghosts have appeared that are interfering with critical attempts to teach our students to be whole in learning. In works that are principally preoccupied with goings-ons within what Ann-Marie Clark termed the “international governmental arena” (Clark, 1995), “transnational issue networks,” and “epistemic communities” make up a duty-bound problem-solving humanity, that is assumed to, somehow, be more than the sum of its parts. Only whole when integrated by governance agencies, perfectly bound to the structures of power and incapable of critical distance, this humanity is a perfect match for the global partner that neoliberal governing institutions are working to fabricate. It is the first ghost in IS classes. More critical courses often infer from the study of global processes and practices that some kind of sociological humanity has appeared, without looking into how it made itself or was made. From the network form of it all, a network humanity is presumed into existence. Thus, by metonymy, is a second cosmopolitan ghost created that haunts IS. Sometimes, it is also assumed that some kind of counterhegemonical humanity will rise to challenge the hegemony of global elites and make a new world possible. This is a third ghost; others could be invoked.

Still folded in a supernatural world that cannot be of their making, as far from experience as their cold war predecessors were, IS students can be no more imaginative, or literate (in the critical sense of the term, “where literacy is defined as

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a practice of reflecting, analyzing, and making critical judgments in relation to social, economic and political issues’’) (McLearn and Farahamandpur [2001]).

To teach IS in an unalienating manner, we must draw from lived lives, not infer lessons from the doings of ghosts, however quotidian they may seem.

**Avant-Garde Pedagogy: Radical Reconnection with Experience**

One of the many particularities of Laval University (the oldest francophone university in the Americas) is the freedom it gives the professors it hires. At Laval, political science is what professors make of it, for better or for worse.

Hired nine years ago, I was given the broad mandate to teach what I thought most relevant. In my first semester, I was given a half-leave to take a course on cognitive pedagogy, and taught only one course, an undergraduate seminar of my own design titled *Critique de l'économie politique internationale* (The Critique of International Political Economy). In the following five years, I redefined two mandatory courses that had been created previously by older colleagues (*Principes de relations internationales*—our introduction to international relations—and *La politique et l'économie*, about state–society relations), and I created two new ones: *Internationalisme et résistance dans l'économie mondiale* (Internationalism and Resistance in the World Economy, an M.A./Ph.D. class) and *Voyages dans l'économie-monde* (Travels in the World Economy), for senior undergraduates. In the following four years I worked on reinventing two core courses: *Introduction à la politique contemporaine* (Introduction to Contemporary Politics, our mandatory point of entry into the undergraduate program), and *Séminaire de doctorat* (our core Ph.D. seminar, traditionally offered by the program director—a post I held between June 2000 and June 2002).

Four courses, chosen for their pedagogical interest, will be discussed here. In order of their creation, they are: *Internationalisme* (b. 1994), *Voyages* (b. 1997), *Introduction* (b. 2000), and *Séminaire* (b. 2001). In each, I used techniques borrowed from the “historical avant-garde (Dada, futurists, surrealist, *Internationale Lettristes*) as well as from the *Internationale Situationniste* to animate critical presence in the classroom and perhaps, as Walter Benjamin said of the surrealist project, to win with students “the energies of intoxication for the revolution” (Benjamin, 1986).

*Internationalisme et résistance dans l'économie mondiale*

From the point of view of pedagogical innovation, this is the most modest course that will be discussed here, and the one that draws less explicitly from avant-garde techniques.

As many have written (Carr, 1994, 1999; Drainville, 1995; Herod, 1995; Hobsbawm, 1988; Waterman, 1992, 1996), the “new internationalism of social movements” stays closer to everyday life than did nineteenth century internationalism, bound to general political programs transcending specificities and contexts (as was, for instance, the First International to the Communist Manifesto). Confined to what Alberto Melucci would have called “the pre-political dimension of everyday life” (Melucci, 1989:222), the “new internationalism” brings with it to the world

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9 An outgrowth of the Séminaire de Québec (1663), Laval University was founded in 1852. Its original Papal charter was replaced in 1971.

10Cognitive pedagogy is at the center of Laval's client-based approach. Courses are now given to all new professors, under the ages of the Réseau de valorisation de l'enseignement (b. 1996). About Laval's move to clientelism, see Denys Delage, 'Une université victime du clientélisme?' in *Le Fil des événements*, October 9, 1997. The article is available on-line: (www.ulaval.ca/scom/au.fil.des.evenements/1997/10.09/idees.htm). The outlines of all courses mentioned in this article are available from the Web site of Laval's Département de science politique at (www.pol.ulaval.ca).
economy the whole, unresolved, realm of quotidian experience. For that reason, its focus tends to be strategic or tactical rather than political.

In organizational terms as well, the new internationalism is less synthetic than the old one was. Rather than a coherent, disciplined movement steered by an executive committee (what the First International was between 1864 and 1875), a confederation of parties held to programmatic coherence (what the Second International was between 1889 and 1914), or a movement bound to an univocal analysis (what the Fourth International remains), the “new internationalism” is a diffused and changing movement of local, national, international, and transnational organizations that gather to fight particular struggles. In the world of labor, relevant organizations include union locals and national confederations (the American Teamsters, the Canadian Auto Workers, Brazil’s *Central Única dos Trabalhadores*, etc.), as well as international confederations and international trade secretariats (e.g., the International Metal Workers’ Federation, the International Federation of Chemical and Energy Workers Union, etc.). Also part of the “new internationalism” are: community-based groups (e.g., the Coalition for Justice in the Maquiladora, *Mujer Obrera*, Hometown Against Shutdowns, etc.), transnational associations (e.g., ATTAC, the Ruckus Foundation, the Campaign for a More Democratic United Nations, etc.), women’s groups (e.g., the International Network Against Female Sexual Slavery and Traffic in Women, the Global Alliance Against Traffic in Women, the International Solidarity Network of Women Living Under Muslim Laws, etc.), “No Logo” campaigners (against GAP, Monsanto, Nestle, Nike, Philip Van Heusen, UPS, Suzuki, etc.), as well as people working to free labor leaders or social activists (Ken Saro-Wiwa, Mumia Abu-Jamal, Wei Jingsheng, Wariebi K. Agamene, etc.) or to fight transnational policies (most notable was the 1998 campaign against the Multilateral Agreement on Investment). This list, of course, is not exhaustive, and its categories are not fixed. Indeed, one of the defining characteristics of the “new internationalism” is that it most often involves conjunctural associations of otherwise dispersed groups, brought together by the exigencies of a particular campaign, that often disband as soon as their action is over (sometimes leaving institutional traces behind).11

To teach this significant, and perhaps revolutionary, movement in an unalienating matter, one only has to remain true to its closeness to everyday life and not let classroom explorations be locked up in preemptive or abstract categories (either those governing cosmopolitan IS, or those of student activists, who often come to class looking to transcend their own activities by explaining them in terms of broad programs to reinvent the world). The challenge of *Internationalisme* then, is not so much in teaching the material as it is in not letting political questions overdetermine its study.

After a minimal introduction on the “old” left internationalism, the seminar proper begins with the first of a dozen student presentations on an ongoing, or recent, transnational campaign. Free to choose their topic, students can also choose to work on their own, or with whomever they wish (next fall for the first time students will be allowed to work with people from outside the university, who will become regular participants in the seminar, thus bringing the study of IS and everyday concerns still closer together). What presenters are obliged to do, though, is treat campaigns as “located” events, both in the more immediate and traditional sense of the term (as events taking place in particular locales occupied by existing

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11 A good example of such institutional trace is the U.S./Guatemala Labor Education Project, born in 1987 of a campaign waged by the Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers Union, the International Ladies Garment Worker’s Union, the Teamsters, and the United Auto Workers on behalf of *Lanuaj’ workers in Amatitlán, Guatemala. Since its inception, the US/GLEP has played a significant role in other labor protests in Guatemala, most notably for workers at Petrosteel, *Confecciones Transcontinentales*, and Phillips–Van Heusen (Hogness, 1989; Interhemispheric Resource Center, 1996; Johns, 1998; McClain, 1992).
communities) and in the more prospective sense (as events taking place on the relatively new terrain of the world economy, occupied by occasional communities that are no less real for being so transnational).

By staying focused on tactical and strategic choices, students come to know world orders not as something that exists outside actions, and global power not as an absolute thing out of social relations, but as a series of concrete, specific, and relative limits to possibilities. To them, the world ceases to be an abstract space that could only ever be inhabited by cosmopolitan ghosts of one sort or another, and starts to become a field of tactical and strategic experiences, a place they can develop a “feel for,” to borrow Yi-Fu Tuan’s subjectivist definition of critical learning:

Abstract space, lacking significance other than strangeness, becomes concrete place, filled with meaning. (Tuan, 1977)\(^\text{12}\)

Dialectically (and in a way that relates intimately to Paulo Freire’s dialogical pedagogy), students learn of the broader political context by becoming conversant in matters of tactics and strategy (Peters and Lankshear, 1994). To echo, critically, the slogan of Porto Alegre, *Internationalisme* students learn not just in an authoritative and alienating manner that “Another World is Possible,” but feel connected to its making. This is reflected in class discussions, that do not build on preemptive, abstract of absolute, political categories, but stay focused on matters of strategies and tactics.

Thus is a critical “situation” sometimes created in *Internationalisme* that encourages students to become truly engaged in mapping their way to and across the world economy, and in a manner that lets them discover possible futures that may be getting buried in totalizing histories (of whatever political perspective).

*Voyages dans l’économie-monde*

An undergraduate course usually offered to fifty or sixty students, *Voyages* is the most deliberately, and theatrically, constructed course I teach. For its content, it draws inspiration from what Michel Foucault called the classical (premodern, presocial scientific) *épistéme*, within which the situated knowledge of travelers occupied a privileged position (think Montaigne’s travels, or the tradition of *peregrination academica*, marginalized by the rise of social sciences in the nineteenth century). In its form, *Voyages* borrows from avant-garde techniques of mise-en-scène (from Tristan Tzara’s to Bertolt Brecht’s to Jean Vilar to Augusto Boal’s).

To foster intimacy and nurture the sense of togetherness without which no collective appropriation of the material presented by a lecturing professor is possible, *Voyages* is taught in the penumbra, with almost no lighting added to that which comes off projected images (in the course of a thirteen-weeks semester, more than four hundred slides are shown students). This has the further advantages of discouraging students from taking too many notes (a process that individualizes as well as instrumentalizes knowledge) and of helping the whole class, professor and students alike, fight off the disempowering effect of a bleary classroom. In the penumbra, “the cheapness, the coldness, the drabness and the harshness of the surfaces” (Shor, 1987) get softened a little.

To further the sense of *étranger* and togetherness, lectures are built as plays in both senses of the term. *Voyages* then, is both a theatrical performance where students are actors as well as spectators and a game they participate in.\(^\text{13}\)

At the beginning of each class, I present—in professorial mode—a brief biography of the week’s cast of characters and distribute parts. When the play


\(^{13}\) On plays and teaching see Lather (2000). See also Welchman (1989) and McLellan (1996).
begins, I become a narrator reading a script (professors often read lecture notes to students, but rarely deliberately or theatrically. Doing so creates an effect of "estrangement" that deconstructs professorial authority). I also mind the slide projector, discretely so as to interfere as little as possible with the theatricality of the class’s performance, and cue students to their readings using their character’s name.

What students are asked to read are highlighted passages from the memoirs of travelers and creators. On the third week of the course, for instance, when we look into mercantile discoveries and the birth of a modern perspective unto the world, the first excerpt read is from Leonardo da Vinci’s 1492 text on the birth of perspectivism, a clear and eloquent monad of the modern world-view (Hamou, 1995). Follow excerpts from the journals of Christopher Columbus (Colomb, 1981), Jacques Cartier (Cartier, 1992), and André Everard van Bramm Houckgeest (Houckgeest, 1992). Week seven is on the “involuntary travels” of slaves of the Atlantic trade (1502–1833), French, English, and French-Canadian convicts (from the opening of the French penal colony of Guyana in 1852 to the eve of the Second World War) and Afghan, Vietnamese, and Congolese refugees in the twenty-first century. The historical specificity and relativity of modes of confinement, exclusions, and resistance are explored through the writings, among others, of: Dam Joulin (first lieutenant abroad L’Africain, a slave ship out of Nante [Mousnier, 1957]); Frederic Douglass, who was born a slave, escaped, and became one of the principal animators of the antislavery movement in the United States (Douglass, 1980); Jérôme-Auguste Chambon, a customs inspector under Louis XIV (Vissière and Vissière, 1982); Charles Guillain, governor of the French penal colony in New Caledonia (Pierre, 1982); Louise Michel, teacher, principal of the Comité de vigilance des femmes de Montmartre and passionaria of the Paris Commune (Michel, 1979 [1886], 1999); François-Maurice Lepailleur, one of the principals of the 1837 patriote rebellion, exiled to Australia in 1840 (Lepailleur, 1972); and John Knudsen who gathered stories of Vietnamese refugees in Hong Kong (Knudsen, 1992).

To give students a sense of the real (specific and relative) limits to the possibilities of life under historical world orders, it is crucial that characters not be presented like the bearers of some abstract truth or authenticity and that plays not be constructed as tales out of time or context. Rather, what Willam F. Pinar called “autobiographies of alterity” (Pinar, 2000), and others “Re-narrations of differences” (Kellner, 2000) must be presented in all their materiality and historicity, as lives lived within, and sometimes against, the structured confines of the world economy. When they submit to global modes of discipline (be they those of the Atlantic slave trade or international migratory arrangements), when they bump against the structures of world order (those of global capitalism, patriarchy, imperialism, and so on), or when they struggle to free themselves, travelers learn something about the historical nature of power in the world economy. In certain circumstances, traveling is an experience that forces a kind of hermeneutics-on-the-fly that offers a snapshot of world order. The intent of Voyage is to bring students as close as possible to these experiences.

Drawn into crucial moments of encounter with historical structures of power, students sometimes become full participants in the class. As the semester progresses, the barrier between actors (professors and historical agents in uncritical pedagogies) and spectators (students) is not broken down (à la Brecht and Boal) as

14 On effect of estrangement in Brecht’s theater see Jameson (2000).
15 Columbus was chosen both for his obvious significance and for the matter-of-fact way in which he displays the perspective of his time; Cartier for his relevance to the immediate region; and Houckgeest, who was the chief representative of the Dutch East India Company in Canton, because his 1794–1795 trip highlights well the relative thinness and fragility of the capitalist world economy in the latter part of the eighteenth century.
much as it withers in the face of a common experience. This helps create a shared context from which the class as a whole can draw sense and significance.

Of course, it is hard, and perhaps immodest to speak on behalf of one’s students. What I can say of student’s experiences in Voyage is that I have never taught a class in which I or a student asking a question or making a comment could draw as much from lectures given three, four, or five weeks previously. By week thirteen, when we discuss exile (an experience that, in many ways, contains all others), students remember Louise Michel’s forced exile better for having seen Nadar’s pictures of her and listened to a fellow classmate read from the diary she kept in New Caledonia. They also remember Henry Roth’s fascinating Call It Sleep, fourriéristes communities (a dozen slides are devoted to them), Mary Kingslay’s attempt at death by travel (Kingslay, 1992), and the making of the Chinese Diaspora in the nineteenth century. They can think about the specificities of world orders, and have enough collective memory to relate the experience of an Afghan refugee in the twentieth century to that of an English convict of the nineteenth. If politics, as Milan Kundera put it, is the struggle of memory against forgetfulness, revolutions are sometimes made in Voyages.

Students have also written in this course the best essays I have ever corrected. Free to begin with whatever travel experience they wish, rendered in whatever form they prefer (travelers, memoirs have been studied, as well as journals, novels, films, paintings, etc.), they bring all that they have into their reflections. Many have also taken their own travel experiences as a starting point. Last year, a student wrote of her experience in international adoption (in the 1990s, Quebeckers began adopting orphan girls from China). The essay she produced was a model of sociological imagination.

Introduction à la politique contemporaine

Our mandatory point of entry into the B.A. program, Introduction has a broad, loosely defined, mandate to familiarize incoming political science students with the most important phenomenons of modern political life. The pedagogical format, made necessary by the number of students in attendance (between 100 and 250), is straight fact-giving, textbook-thumping, lecture-from-the-podium. Introduction is a service course, thus not a sovereign moment unto itself, but a component of the new, knowledge-based, economy. Here is where, in my teaching, ideas of critical pedagogy clash most obviously with the exigencies of everyday teaching in large universities. When faced with 200 students, to whom one must give a relatively fixed content, the limits of dialogic teaching quickly become apparent.

Still, more is possible than I would have thought when I began teaching. Working within the constraints of near-industrial teaching against their alienating purpose, I built Introduction as a dérive in the very precise sense of the term defined by the Internationale Situationniste, a key influence of the mouvement du 22 mars in Nanterre, ground zero of the student uprising of May 1968, the focal point of the last global antisystemic revolution (Wallerstein, 1989).

Like all other avant-garde groups before it, Situationnistes struggled against alienating orders to be whole in creation. Specifically, they set themselves against the way in which the modern impulse to seize and transform the world had been usurped and made into an alienating regime to govern daily life. At the beginning, before Guy Debord formulated his celebrated thesis detailing how everyday life in

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16 On this breakdown see Boal (1977).
17 The concept of dérive was actually introduced by the Internationale Lettriste, one of the groups that banded together to form the Internationale Situationniste in 1957. A good intellectual history of the Internationale Situationniste can be found in Wollen (1989). A shorter, more easily accessible dossier was recently published by the French Magazine Littéraire (no. 399), June 2001, pp. 20–68. On the centrality of the Internationale Situationniste in May 1968, and on the role of Nanterre enragés in the movement, see Cohn-Bendit (1968).
the *société du spectacle* gets emptied of radical possibilities in the process of producing spectacular moments of false unity (Debord, 1987), *Situs* were especially concerned with the conditions of urban living and the way in which the relatively new science of urbanism (presaged by Haussmann’s *boulevardisation* of Paris, born with Le Corbusier) domesticated urban life by gridding cities into sterility (Bott, 1971; Gombin, 1976; Vaneigem, 1961). Quartered between places, reduced to functionalities (sleeping in sleeping quarters, doing business in business districts), modern urbanites, *Situationnistes* claimed, were never whole anywhere and could never have belonged to themselves.*18*

To reexperience wholeness in the city and fight the alienating grid, *Situationnistes* set out on *déřives*. Defined as “a technical mode of behaviour tied to the specific conditions of urban life, to facilitate quick passage through most varied ambiances” (Debord, 1958), *déřives* were exploratory walkabouts oriented by what *Situationnistes* felt were truer points of reference than the grid’s axes. As dadaists and surrealists had fought the constructed falseness of literature by staying close to words, and as members of the *Internationale Lettriste* had resisted the falsifying allure of words by remaining true to letters, *Situationnistes* fought off the alienating grid by letting their urban deambulations be guided either by the architecture of buildings, or by geographical points of reference having nothing at all to do with the production of cities (in a famous *déřive*, Guy Debord and Gill Wolman met “in the rue des Jardins-Paul and head[ed] north in order to explore the possibilities of traversing Paris at that latitude” [Debord, 1985]). Thus freed from the false consciousness born of alienating cadasters, *Situationniste* teams stayed whole and present in the city and could unearth places where daily life remained irrecoverably varied and modern urbanites whole in living. These places, *Situationnistes* called “psychogeographic hubs.” The best example was *Les Halles* in Paris, a polysemic place of commercial exchange, social relations and deterioration, acculturation, drinking, and prostitution, inhabited and traversed by a mixed population that offered the most remarkable example of unitary ambiance in all of Paris (Ivain, 1958; Khatib, 1958; Sadler, 1998).

Against the gridding of intellectual work by functional concepts, categories, and methods (what Ira Shor called “dismemberment by vocationalization”), I work to transform a large first-year lecture course—a critical site of decontextualization, where students get most reduced—in a way that will let them map their own passage through the discipline.*19* Specifically, I try to make the classroom, and by extension the whole of the university, into an impregnable place where students can remain whole and from which they will be able to gain critical insight into more distant and abstract relationships of power. The classroom itself, then, becomes a hub, the center of the students’ situated perspective. This I do while staying very true to the professorial role students expect when they arrive at universities, and without explaining myself too much. What Paolo Freire called “fear of freedom” operates to such great effect in large first-year classes that students would not trust themselves to embark on a *déřive*, preferring rather to follow whatever alienating guide presents himself to them.*20* In *Introduction*, I lecture as any professor would, without deviating from the set format, while still bringing students on a *déřive*.

In the first lecture, I present a simple material history of universities, beginning with statutes adopted between 1309 and 1317 by students at the University of Bologna that guaranteed their professor’s presence and performance, and ending

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*18* The centerpiece of the *Situationniste* critique of urbanism was a text written by Ivan Chtcheglov (Gilles Ivain), published in October 1953 (Ivain, 1958). On the situationnist critique of urbanism see also Paquot (2001) and Sadler (1998).

*19* The quote is from Shor (1987). On this, see also Raoul Vaneigem’s comments on “the human resource approach to education” (Vaneigem, 1995). More generally, see Freitag (1995) and Niemark (1999).

with a review of contemporary clientelist practices, including sponsorship deals (with Nike, Coke, et al.), private–public research partnerships, and attempts, at the University of Western Virginia and elsewhere, to create “free speech zones”—as clear and concrete an example of depoliticizing by gridding as can be found. At the end of the lecture, I read from the menu of Laval’s cafeteria (run by Sodexho Inc.) and say (rather than sing!) words from “Savoir et Pouvoir,” the anthem Laval University recently adopted in an attempt to increase consumer loyalty amongst students. All are presented as material artefacts. The intent here is both to show the historical specificity and indeterminacy of the structures that govern universities, and to make them relevant to studies of more removed social and political orders. If I do my work well in that first lecture (which demands, amongst other things, that I camp convincingly the role of the professor students expect), much that students will go through during the semester (from classroom experiences to sponsored festivities during welcoming week, to the split they will feel between their lives as workers and as students, to their distaste of cafeteria food, to the pain they will experience trying to reduce what they will have learned to fit the exam format) will serve to ground their learning as my lectures move to increasingly more distant and abstract terrains of social relations.

After the initial lecture, three weeks are spent on historical cities—from Plato’s Athens to Mike Davis’s Los Angeles, three on nation-states—from absolutism to neoliberalism, and three on sites of the world economy—from trading fairs in Champagne at the beginning of the thirteenth century to export zones and tourist preserves in the twenty-first. As we move to more abstract sites, students keep the thread of experience unsevered, and they are more likely to be able to map their own way through their new field of study in a manner that is intelligent, imaginative, and irrecoverable, seeing connections and making links that belong only to them. Even in such an abstract place as the world economy, students can engage in the disalienating practice of cognitive mapping and develop the feel of a place.

Beyond concretizing issues and installing experienced relationships of power as heuristic points of reference, organizing the material spatially (from the most immediate and concrete space of the classroom to the most distant and abstract space of the world economy) also has the advantage of furthering a more critical relationship to conceptual constructions and to history. This is not frequent in political science classes, where the past is often mined like a quarry for precious insights taken out of context. In *Introduction*, we visit the same three historical moments (the Renaissance of the Middle Ages, the birth of colonialism, globalization) four times (once for each terrain of social relations). Thus, students get multiple perspectives on historical periods, and they can develop a more intuitive sense of the contingency of power.

As for encouraging a more critical relationship to concepts, traveling from the most concrete and immediate space to the most distant and abstract with a very light conceptual apparatus lets me forego the usual definition of concepts (“students take note: structures are …”). Rather than fix concepts in an authoritative and alienating manner, what I do is show how they work in different contexts for different authors. Throughout the year, students see what questions of hegemony look like in a dozen circumstances, which lets them develop a kind of intuitive understanding of a difficult idea, often presented in an authoritative manner. Again, this lets students make their own way through the literature. I am also careful to arrest my own discourse and discuss specific words, by presenting a glossary of simple terms that often go unexplained in first-year classes. This glossary is made up of terms I have chosen myself, and of those chosen by students.

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21 Laval’s hymn, that was to have been chosen as a result of an open contest, was finally selected by a closed jury and acclaimed in a public meeting in September 2000. It is available in MP3 at [www.ulaval.ca/A1/hymne/mp3.html](http://www.ulaval.ca/A1/hymne/mp3.html).
Of course, it would be a gross exaggeration to pretend that every student in *Introduction* becomes critically engaged in his or her studies or that a unitary ambiance can be easily created in a large introductory lecture, where derives so easily become follow-the-guide tours. Try as professors may, the normal mechanisms of academic alienation operate at their fullest in large first-year classes. Beyond those, neoliberal hegemony is such that, having been interpellated as clients for many years already, students enter first-year classes actually wanting only to purchase competencies in preparation for the job market, in order to become better (and better paid) technicians of whatever new order may be in the making. And of course, at Laval as elsewhere, students often come to class having worked outside. They are, as one anonymous reviewer of this manuscript put it, as “parochial in their lived experience, sleep deprived, and lacking in curiosity [not to speak of knowledge] about the world outside their own” as elsewhere.

But it is a mistake, as well as a defeat of critical engagement, to play to this alienation. Even in a large first-year classroom in a moment of neoliberal hegemony it is possible to create a context for critical inquiry, especially in political science, or sociology, classes. Notwithstanding the recent tendency of universities to treat all students as equal purchasers of marketable competencies, people who enter social science and humanities programs have had experiences within power relationships that are directly relevant to the matter being taught. The intent of *Introduction* is to center teaching as much as possible on those experiences.

Again, I feel it is immodest to speak on students’ behalf, but I can say that I have had clear indications that, given half a chance to engage seriously and critically in intellectual work, students will respond with incredible energy. Even in introductory classes, I have witnessed the “energies of intoxication for the revolution” that Walter Benjamin wrote about. It has even expressed itself after sit-down exams (as alienating an experience as there is at university), when students have been elated—the word is not too strong—at being able to create from their own understanding of concepts rather than being asked to regurgitate authoritative definitions.

After having taken the introductory class, students are keen to engage further in intellectual work. For second- and third-year classes (B.A.’s in Québec take three years to complete), our standard is fifteen to twenty students, and many classes get cancelled when they draw fewer than ten students. Year in and year out, my second- and third-year classes attract between fifty and one hundred students. The critical participation of students in those classes lets me hope that they have not simply decided to “change masters” (as another reviewer put it), but have rather found energy for engagement in unalienating intellectual work. The depth of my own engagement with unalienating pedagogy can be measured by the time I spend correcting essays and exams in these classes.

About the risks of empowering first-year students, I need only say what every teacher knows who has stood beside students rather than above them: the first place students exercise their power and autonomy is where it is gained. Undomesticated, *Introduction* students quickly become an unwieldy bunch, and they will raise questions (about both the material taught and the materiality of our relationship) that absolutely need to be addressed for the class to keep any coherence at all. If the dérive is to have any sense of transformative power at all, professors must be willing to adjust their course to that followed by students, and consider that their lectures are always work-in-progress. As Freire put it: “Those who authentically commit themselves to the people must re-examine themselves constantly” (Freire, 1996 [1970]).

**Séminaire de doctorat**

Constructed later in my career, at a time when I have gained confidence as a teacher and can be more deliberate about my pedagogical intent, taught exclusively
to Ph.D. students, a small and older group with whom more is possible, Séminaire makes the most direct use of avant-garde techniques.

Key here is the intent to break with the taught and learned routine of social-scientific inquiry and to recenter work on the process of creation. This necessarily involves breaking with the usual format of Ph.D. seminars, and with the methodology social science students are taught (with increasing insistence as universities move to vocational learning).

Breaking with the social habits of Ph.D. seminars is easily enough done. Rather than let the Séminaire be a tiny conclave of seminarians bent over canonical texts, I held it in a central meeting room of the social science faculty, and opened it to all graduate and undergraduate students, as well as professors and guest lecturers.

To break with problem-solving/competence-based methodology and begin problematizing the scientific “mode of production” of knowledge, I begin the Séminaire with Lars von Trier’s The Idiots. The jarring story of a group of young people who explore idiocy by becoming idiots themselves, it gave us, by its content and by the way it was made (The Idiots is a “Dogma 95” film), a concrete basis for discussion of avant-garde efforts at inventing new modes of creation, as well as the romantic impulse to engage in experimental work ourselves. With one exception (a student whose instrumentalism suffered no experimentation— to whom I will come back), a varied group of students sharing little beyond their position as intellectual workers inside a university set out to reinvent themselves as idiots of political science. Rather than the relatively open but still academic analyses of texts pertaining to the historical avant-garde that I had planned, the Séminaire was transformed into a series of avant-garde experiments. Sovereignly subjective idiots, we engaged in sessions of automatic writing, and did collages and weekly dérives through the city.

To give our experiments more coherence, to guard against smugness and complacency (enemies of intellectual work, always a tendency of avant-garde groups), and to see what we could make of a different mode of production of knowledge, we forced ourselves to construct something and to put it to some test. This too was done in the way of the avant-garde: what we did was a détournement.

Loosely translated as artistic reappropriation, détournement can be defined either as a process (“a violent excision of elements ... from their original contexts, and a consequent destabilization and recontextualization” [I. S., 1959], or by what gets made (“a certain sublime” [Debord and Wolman, 1956]). A good example of the practice is the eponymous journal of the Internationale Situationniste “a rich collection of montage/collage work on pieces of commodity culture, including … recaptioned or reworked advertisements, comic strips, newspaper photographs, problematic description of scantily clad women, illustrations from industrial manuals, graphs, and so forth” (Levin, 1989:74). Guy Debord’s own Société du spectacle is another eloquent example of détournement (Debord, 1987). Opening with a play on the first sentence of Capital (“the whole life of societies where reign modern conditions of production appear as an immense accumulation of spectacles”), the book followed with a late-modern variation on the first sentence of the Manifesto’s most lyrical passage (“all that was lived has become a representation”), which is used again throughout the book to punctuate the analysis. More contemporary examples, closer to issues related to globalization, include Greenpeace’s and AdBuster’s hijacking of brand-name publicities, or the anti-sweat-shop fashion shows described in Naomi Klein’s No Logo (Klein, 2000).

To effect their détournement de fonds de recherche (what can be loosely translated as critical reappropriation of research funds) six idiots created the Center for the Study of Unitary Globalism (CSUG), modeled on the Internationale Situationniste’s Centre d’étude sur l’urbanisme unitaire. Throughout the spring and in the summer following the course, CSUG members worked to integrate their findings into a grant application to the Carnegie Foundation of New York.
Specifically, the CSUG asked for money to organize sessions of automatic writing and dérives in Bucharest, Ciudad Juarez, and Québec City, three cities chosen as privileged points of contact between quotidian lives and global/abstract relationships (in Ciudad Juarez, a Maquiladora on the U.S./Mexican border, a political community is being born in what can be termed “a space of resistance” that is as transnational as the products that are being assembled; in Bucharest, a new civil society is making itself in a period of accelerated transition from planned to market economies, a process that is shepherded by global regulatory agencies; in Québec City, citizens see their own city through the tourist’s gaze). The intent here is to unearth everyday political knowledge about the world economy that may be getting buried in cosmopolitan ideologies.

At the time of writing, the CSUG application is still being put together. Partnerships with local grassroots organizations are being forged, letters of support sought, budgets constructed, and strategies to communicate the new knowledge established. In its form, the CSUG grant application will be perfectly respectful of academic forms and vernacular; in the synthesis that it makes between artistic and scientific work, it is perfectly critical, and in how it transforms a Ph.D. seminar into a ludic exploration of alternative modes of production of knowledge—and seminarians into idiots, it is the most liberating teaching experience I have ever participated in. It is also a very demanding one. Rather than end in April as classes do at Laval, last year’s Séminaire continued throughout the following summer and fall, as idiots were preparing their détourment. Avant-garde games demand serious, and sometimes seemingly boundless, engagement.

**Conclusion**

Pedagogical practice is political praxis. As such, it cannot be seen in isolation of the material context. Just as there is connivance between (i) neoliberal attempts to create a global absentee subject that would serve as a silent partner for globalizing élites, (ii) what Peter McLaren and Ramin Farahmandpur called “the continuing reduction of education to a subsector of the economy,” (iii) clientelist practices, and (iv) the vocational dismemberment of students, there is a link between transforming classroom teaching, the production of knowledge, “the institutional structures of the school, and the social and material relations of the wider community, society ... nation state” and world order (McLaren, 2000). The untold part of the story is the nearly quotidian skirmishes that had to be fought in the trenches of Laval University (to evoke Gramsci’s tactical language) to defend critical pedagogy. Laval’s professor-centered tradition has kept these to a minimum, much less, I suspect, than similar efforts would have provoked elsewhere. Still, there have been endless meetings with various program directors, heads of the department, deans of the faculties of social science and of graduate studies, up to the vice-rector for academic affairs. That an institutional front exists has to be accepted as a part of the price to be paid to side with students as they work to become full subjects in learning.

The question, raised by one reviewer, of what happens to students who feel excluded by this radically different “mode of production” of knowledge, is a difficult one to address. This is why I have left it for the end. In teaching as elsewhere, modes of production both include and exclude. Revolutions are thus, be they those that change social modes of production or those, more limited, that seek to change the way we teach. Undisciplined by a profound sense of professional duty, the kind of teaching experiment described above could lead to a dictatorship of a new kind; not freedom, but just another, still alienating spectacle, conducted by a different kind of master. In the present context, however, this is more unlikely to happen than the dictatorship of alienating teaching. The student whose instrumentalism suffered no experiment wrote a letter of complaint that argued
that Dada was neither serious nor of any importance to her career as a bureaucrat in the Organisation of American States. Addressed to the head of the department, this letter was forwarded to the highest instances of the university, to which I had to defend the interest and rigour of my pedagogical method. This I did, convincingly enough to be allowed to continue, but the student was still allowed to withdraw from the course—the core course of our Ph.D. program—and replace it with a course given by her own supervisor. Even if one discounts the professional integrity of professors who engage in it (critical engagement, of course, is not a substitute to the fulfilling of one’s professional duties to students), critical teaching is under such close surveillance by authorities in place—who will take every opportunity to defend clientelist teaching—that we need not reason as if students who do not welcome it, or are afraid of the freedom imagination brings, were not privileged by the current system. Rather, we who want to teach in an unalienating manner must concern ourselves with those who are excluded, marginalized, and reduced by neoliberal/vocational teaching.

References


