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Opinion – Teaching Fascism and the Far Right in International Relations

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My undergraduate political theory courses skipped fascism. The professor opined that it was not worth covering, which seemed reasonable in a pre-Trump world. Unfortunately, in an age where the far right is globally ascendant, ignoring fascism is no longer an option throughout the discipline. As a field, International Relations (IR) is doing a better job of talking about fascism and the far right, especially since January 6th, 2021, but these topics remain tricky to broach in the classroom and their relevance is not always immediately clear. Drawing from a course dedicated to fascism, populism, and the far right I taught this past spring, I distill some lessons here on how to incorporate these topics into IR courses at all levels.

Why bother? If it was not apparent already – from the January 8th insurrection in Brazil, the rise of Giorgia Meloni in Italy, or the rightward shift of the Republican Party in the US – the far right is globally ascendant and shows no signs of slowing down. Fascism, populism, and far-right studies have long sat within the purview of political theory and comparative politics, but IR scholars have important insights into the topic. Scholarship on fascism has taken a transnational turn in recent years, and attention is increasingly being paid to forms of transnational cooperation and learning among modern far-right parties. Additionally, it's now undeniable that the far right is shaping major developments in the international system – something that a focus on orthodox power politics might miss. The far right poses significant challenges to the liberal international order, not to mention the major institutions that comprise it, and Russia has leveraged ties with far-right groups to further divide and weaken the US and its European allies. While terrorism has been a focus of the discipline for over two decades, we are only now coming to accept the fact that most of it stems from homegrown, right-wing radicalism. The use of the f-word has re-emerged at the highest levels, with Russia citing denazification as a *casus belli* for their war in Ukraine; counter-framing by Ukraine and the West accuses Putin of being the real fascist.

Even without directly acknowledging the importance of the far right in IR, we still implicitly engage with it in our classrooms and major texts. The interwar period and World War II appear in many introductory courses and readings. For better and for worse, the focus is kept on theory and main themes – the multipolarity of the 1930s or the failure of the League of Nations to confront revisionist challengers – while fascism itself is relegated to being an ideological factor used to illustrate constructivist theory. The broad transnational influence and diversity of fascism in this period, not to mention the ways in which it inspired revisionism, are glossed over. This may lead students to overlook the extent to which power politics and ideologies are intractably linked, to miss the links between foreign policy and domestic politics, or to leave unexamined the similarities between the interwar period and the present. What message do we send in introductory courses when we emphasize polarity alone in trying to understand the era?

To be sure, intro courses should not give a full accounting of such varied topics as Rome-Berlin relations or the rise of Giorgia Meloni. And, to their credit, intro students tend to sympathize with constructivist explanations (in my experience at least) and incorporate them into their reasoning. But I suspect that integrating discussions of fascism and the far right into IR courses can be done better, in ways that have significant payoffs.

Even modest steps in this direction can help students engage with key theoretical questions. By referring more to

current events involving far-right actors, many of which are top-of-mind for Gen Z, we show how IR theories make sense of the present. Intro courses might ask students the extent to which the recommendations of neoliberal theory drive contemporary populism, as globalization and open immigration beget responses from voters who perceive themselves to be left behind. Focusing on the content of fascism, we can critique realist assumptions about the rationality of actors and spark discussions of how ideology shapes threat ascription and balancing behaviors. Discussing far-right transnational networks provides a stark lesson that constructivism is not just about progressive ideals that advance human rights monotonically.

Bringing the far right in can also enrich advanced seminars and inspire students to tackle new and interesting research questions. One of the best discussions I ever had about international order occurred when I asked students to contrast the revisionist aims and prospects of interwar fascists with modern far-right actors. While the more aggressive fascist challenge imploded, all of my students agreed that the contemporary far right was here to stay. However, my students could not agree on the long-term ramifications of this for International Relations. The room was divided on questions about what Trump's braggadocio did to commitments abroad, how right-wing radicalization (not just polarization!) affects American foreign policy, what the success of xenophobic parties in the West means for China's rise (an interesting question which brings up the importance of race in IR), or whether Hindutva makes it possible to anchor the Quad alliance on shared democratic principles. IR is often indeterminate, especially with regard to domestic inputs on policy, and the rise of the far right provides students with a chance to critically reflect on some of our key assumptions and theories.

How can we reap benefits without straining syllabi or demanding too much from students? While keeping IR at the core, we can import key concepts, theories, and examples from far-right studies in a way which is accessible and brief. It's important to keep a few factors in mind when doing this.

First, it's crucial to define our terms. Our students are living through politically-tumultuous times with unprecedented access to media. They see terms like fascist, neofascist, populist, extremist, far right, radical right, illiberal, reactionary, and conservative get thrown around constantly. Every student enters the classroom with their own conceptual landscape, and it's crucial that we add some technical specificity here. If (and when) you use terms like fascist or far right, take time to define them. This applies especially to those intro sessions on World War II and how it shaped the evolution of the international system. Everyone has a vague idea of what fascism is, but defining key elements of it situates students in the politics of the era and gives them a means to compare the ideologies that comprise the far-right spectrum. If you don't talk to your students about palingenetic ultranationalism, who will? The same applies to actors; try to situate them politically, especially if you need to admit that scholars are split on how to classify someone.

Defining terms and situating actors will cut down on confusion and give your students a baseline that they can carry outside of your classroom. It will also ensure that discussions about fascism and the far right remain respectful, since the conversations remain rooted in the concepts and their application. In general, students apply terms like neofascist or post-fascist liberally to label far-right populists, but when pushed they usually defend these classifications well. In doing so, they exercise a keen awareness that the conceptual boundaries between ideological positions are fuzzy and, increasingly, permeable.

When defining these terms, I think it's important to avoid simply contrasting the right with the left. Engage with the specific content of the ideas. Likewise, you should avoid the tendency to say that populism can be of the left or right without qualifying that, at present, the momentum is with the right-leaning populists. Exploring the contents of ideologies is key to understanding their origins and effects, and students will be grateful to have that background as a reference point.

Second, while students are broadly interested in far-right politics there will be wide variation in their substantive knowledge. Interwar history will be hazy, and they likely only have a few major reactionary populists on their radar at present. To make sure that everyone in the class can follow along, introduce people and movements carefully. The best way to assure an even knowledge base is to assign news articles and current events readings (we expect students to read the news anyway, and sometimes even put this on syllabi, but compliance is dubious). I actually got

into the regular practice of starting each seminar with some major news items – this is a useful way to jumpstart memories and frame the material.

Third, if you really want to integrate a discussion of fascism and the far right you need to ask if you are comfortable with exposing students to primary sources. This is less of an issue for far-right actors like Marine Le Pen or Viktor Orbán, but there are ethical factors to account for when assigning Hitler or Mussolini, or when delving into the manifestos of domestic terrorists (or secondary sources referencing them). I wrestled with this a bit initially and decided to include these sources while situating them in context carefully. This decision paid off, and led to some of the more memorable class discussions. Modern far-right actors in particular are colorful and oscillate between skillful framing and saying the quiet part out loud, making them great for critical analysis. We had a long discussion about Le Pen's 2016 interview with *Foreign Affairs* and contextualized her position on Russia and its evolution into the present – a roundabout way of discussing Russian foreign policy, but one that stuck with students. Giving background to ideas is a good practice in general, and one that we should do if we choose to deploy perennial favorites like "Tragedy of the Commons" or *Clash of Civilizations*. "Tragedy"effectively illustrates collective action problems. Unfortunately, its proposed solution of "abandoning the commons in breeding" veers into eco-fascism, especially in light of Hardin's "nativist agenda." The civilizationalist worldview of *Clash* resonates with right-wing populists who, like Huntington, oppose multiculturalism. Again, many of our courses already engage with far-right ideas, and we do a disservice to students by failing to explicitly acknowledge this.

International Relations has ignored the far right for too long. Shifting the focus of our debates starts not just in publications and reappraisals of our theories, but also in terms of how we construct and present the discipline to students. As with climate change and the waning of American hegemony, the re-emergence of a global, normalized far right will be a defining feature of their lifetimes. We owe it to our students to provide a means of understanding the changes currently underway.

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