Barbarism and What is to be Done: Reforming Discourse in the Classroom

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I sometimes lie wide awake at night thinking about what university classrooms could look like in another decade. Huddled tribes of students are sitting in their designated territories, silently and angrily typing messages on social media while a jaded professor tries to unite them for a simple discussion of a course reading. When a tribesman tries to talk to those outside their tribe, their distinct worldview and codewords render their speech incomprehensible to others, who simply hear, "Bar, bar, bar." In this new barbaric landscape – where tribalism abounds and the terms of knowledge-creation have become fragmented – what, if anything, can a professor do?

Barbarism is most commonly understood as the inclination toward cruelty to outsiders and an inability to participate in a larger "civilization." We might think of intellectual barbarism as an inclination to cling dogmatically to a worldview (even when presented with falsifying evidence) and as a failure to open up space for dialogue with others. Because barbarians see the intellectual domain – much like other aspects of the social world – as hostile and competitive, their tendency is toward cruelty to outsiders.

If I'm right, professors of IR will increasingly have to deal with two barbarisms: an ideologically motivated, political barbarism (most often from students); and a disciplinary, theoretical-methodological barbarism (most often from professors and graduate students).

Political barbarism will be easy to spot. It will manifest itself in arrogant and narrowly focused rhetoric that mirrors what has become acceptable on cable television, talk radio, and now mainstream politics. It will parade its sectarian bias while simultaneously (and sanctimoniously) claiming protection for its own bizarre and frivolous claims under the banner of pluralism. It will on occasion have the aesthetic of a verbal street fight and often skirt the boundaries of speech-act violence and physical violence.

From a completely different direction, the IR professor will also have to deal with theoretical and methodological barbarism. For several decades, there has been much discussion about the balkanization of the discipline along various theoretical and methodological lines: qualitative versus quantitative approaches; positivist versus post-positivist. This fracture has led some to believe that scholars are now ontologically divided: the theoretical commitments of various scholars mean that they now live in different "worlds". In better times, this competition may have been productive. Now, it seems inexcusable.

If cozy and refined academics cannot find ways to be civil to one another, then why should students? If academics can't agree on basic facts about the world and how they understand them, then what hope do young students (who are constantly being bombarded by radicalizing media) have? (For a very comprehensive discussion on IR and its complicity in post-truth politics, read Philip Conway's article here).

In designing your class, then, how can you move away from barbaric discourse towards a shared knowledge community? The following are a few of my preliminary ideas.

Establish the rule of civility. How do we begin? In the strictest and most technical sense, we should use our authority

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as university instructors to lay down the law — in writing. This means publishing rules and consequences in clear language in our syllabus. Examples of these "civility statements" can be found here and here. I encourage the harshest possible consequences for "uncivilized" actions that denigrate or demean fellow students — classroom or course expulsion.

Practice important skills in class. If necessary, instructors should also practice skills such as turn-taking and elicitation with their students. The instructor shouldn't assume that students are practiced in these skills or even that they will naturally imitate your own examples. Some subtle language you can use to encourage these behaviors include: "Why don't you choose another student to take up that point?" or "Why don't you ask another student what they think about that idea?" An instructor might even go so far as to make a poster with language typically used in civilized classroom discourse. (This graphic might be a good starting point.)

Consult early with students. Sometimes problematic behavior can be redirected through personal meetings with students. A teacher may need to talk directly with a student about how much they talk in class, how they allow other students to take turns, and other good practices of classroom discourse. Too early is better than too late.

Practice empathy in class. It might also be important to encourage students to step out of their own way of thinking and examine the attitudes and positions of others. An instructor might ask, "Why would someone promote this kind of policy? What principles might they embrace? How would they argue this position?"

Foster a common understanding of science and scientific practice. There are many different ideas about what science is (here is a useful visual), but most instructors in most disciplines adhere to a science that resides somewhere in the realm of scientific realism. Teachers should encourage their students to think scientifically in the sense that they: know the basic scientific method and can test their own ideas with it; adhere to the ideas of transparency and honesty; evaluate the integrity of sources and information; use corroboration and triangulation to improve information accuracy; and use falsification to test hypotheses.

Use Socrative methods. Finally, an instructor can use Socratic approaches to help students interrogate their own belief systems, explore gaps in their logic, and to explore contradictions and fallacies. Not only does this help students become more rigorous thinkers, but it also leads to deeper learning experiences.

Each of these steps should help in establishing the techniques of classroom discourse in a civilized and productive way. They should help to turn zero-sum competition between ideological tribes into cooperative learning experiences. Now, when it seems that discourse is reaching a barbaric precipice, our civilizing mission might not only be a practical classroom imperative but also our greatest moral mission.

About the author:

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