

We Need to Talk about International Relations

Written by Herman Salton

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HERMAN SALTON, SEP 27 2017

“Professor, you are biased.” This comment—made by one of my students in the midst of a heated debate about the ethical implications of humanitarian intervention in Syria—came as a welcome surprise. It was surprising because I make a conscious effort, in my International Relations (IR) classes, to show a variety of perspectives and to hide my own views as much as possible. It was welcome because I also try to instill in my pupils the merit of polite disagreement. Made with a smile, the comment was nothing if not polite—and disquieting. It prompted me to think hard about the considerable challenges and immense rewards of teaching IR to a non-Western audience.

I make a claim to be the world’s most fortunate professor, for I teach a fascinating subject and my students are that rarity: an engaged, hard-working, enthusiastic, and motivated cohort coming from sixteen Asian countries (as well as from Syria and Palestine) and extremely diverse. Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, and Islam are all present in the classroom; as are ethnic minorities such as the Hazaras of Afghanistan, the Tamils of Sri Lanka, and the Rohingyas of Myanmar. For a cosmopolitan who is allergic to borders and is most comfortable in a multicultural environment where there is no dominant nationality, religion, or belief, this makes for a fascinating teaching experience. A US-style, liberal arts college in Asia, my institution is atypical for its unashamedly normative mission (educating the next generation of female leaders); location (Bangladesh, far from the skyscrapers of Singapore, Hong Kong, or Shanghai); and modest means (our funding model relies almost entirely on donations). It is also moved by the belief—unusual in the profit-making world of today’s higher education—that it is possible to break the gender glass ceiling by offering a high-quality education to talented women, most of whom would not be able to afford it (a large majority of our students are on full scholarships).

Anchored in the liberal arts tradition, my teaching style encourages lively discussions. Yet this Socratic, question-and-answer approach also means that I regularly find myself playing the devil’s advocate in order to push my students to see “the other side” of their arguments, whatever these may be (and I always tell them that I am interested in their *arguments*, not in their opinions). In the Western context where I grew up and taught, this typically involved me reminding students that the views from the “Global South” might be very different. I am no Marxist, but so broad was the support of my Western-educated pupils for humanitarian intervention, human rights, and global ethics that my adversarial style often pushed me in the impolite company of Gaddafi, Mugabe, Chávez, and the like (a lawyer by training, defending the indefensible comes naturally to me).

Yet when I arrived in Asia, I realized that “East is East”—or at least not the West. This epiphany struck within minutes of my first IR class, during a discussion on the role of the United Nations in Iraq and Afghanistan. I am hardly a card-carrying member of the UN, having written a book fairly critical of its role in Rwanda, and I do believe that constructive criticism is the best way to improve the organization. But I was unprepared for the level of cynicism—or shall I say “realism”—showed by most of my new students. Since some of their family members had been killed by US bombs, this should not have surprised me. The fact that it did, highlighted both the challenges and opportunities offered by my new job. As it turns out, teaching humanitarian intervention is easier in the UK than in a place where students saw their parents killed by coalition bombs.

As I pushed my students further, however, I noted that only superficially did most of them share a “realist” outlook. Their attitudes towards the US, for instance, were an exercise in ambivalence: on the one hand they showed contempt for the superpower, both when it acted (Afghanistan, Iraq) and when it failed to act (Rwanda, Syria). On the

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other, it became quite clear that, had they been US diplomats or politicians (and we simulated several crises during which they “became” precisely that), they would not hesitate to defend—and use—“power,” regardless of any ethical consideration. For students attending a university whose very mission is to encourage ethical leadership, this was intriguing—and so was the attraction shown by most of them towards the US. Their attitude to human rights was equally elastic: such rights, I was told, were simply a Trojan horse for Western imperialism (so, apparently, is the UN). Yet when I asked whether this also applied to gender equality, I was reassured that women’s rights were “universal.” So pity the poor professor who is then pushed into the (equally impolite) company of Bush Sr, Blair, and Sarkozy.

“East” and “West” may be unhelpful—even misleading—categories, but a discussion is needed on whether IR as a discipline is cutting across nations, languages, and cultures the way it is supposed to do. This discussion would raise stimulating questions: is IR value- and culture-free? Does it matter where one’s students come from, and can one learn and teach IR regardless of who one is and where one is based? Or is IR better suited to certain cultures and places? In other words, is IR truly “international,” or is it rather “provincial” in both outlook and outcomes? Since the discipline is currently dominated by Anglo-American institutions and by scholars who were formed there (myself included), these are fundamental—even existential—questions. Given such doubts, it is perhaps no wonder that those teaching IR in a “developing” country face peculiar challenges, starting with the fact that IR textbooks—even “critical” ones—are visibly inadequate to meet the needs of non-Western students with widely different cultures, beliefs, and life stories. Perhaps that comment about my perceived bias was disquieting precisely because it was spot on; for no matter how hard I try, my Western education, values, and biases will eventually come through. The question is: should they? And are these my own biases, or those of IR as a discipline?

About the author:

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