

Incorporating Race into Introductory International Relations Courses

Written by Audie Klotz

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AUDIE KLOTZ, DEC 17 2020

Webinars and blogs have proliferated in recent months, reflecting heightened attention to the longstanding, deeply entrenched analytical marginalization of race in the field of International Relations (IR). Many well-intentioned colleagues now wring their hands; how, they ponder, could researchers and teachers have overlooked such a pervasive problem? Having raised such concerns for many years, sometimes quietly, sometimes loudly, I do hope IR has finally reached a transformative tipping point.

Yet I remain puzzled why, two decades into the 21st century, many instructors still find it so difficult to incorporate race and racism into their curriculum. The hand wringers typically claim a lack of substantive knowledge or discomfort with the terminology, but any new perspective or unfamiliar material should never be viewed as a barrier. After all, academics are supposed to be life-long learners. Acknowledging race and racism may indeed require an extra dose of humility, plus the allocation of time for reading more widely. Omissions, however, run deeper than what might be remedied by personal epiphanies.

Some people rightly fear backlash, be it from students, colleagues, or public critics of academia. Job security and white privilege provide degrees of protection, unevenly distributed. While responsibility rests foremost with institutions to tackle this fear factor directly, individuals can help by normalizing course content that addresses race and racism. Otherwise, whether restricted by fear or blinkered by ignorance, the result is that too many instructors function by default as gatekeepers when we need more door openers. The dearth of overt engagement with race in most introductory textbooks, especially those aimed at wide markets, both reflects and compounds the problem—clash of civilizations, anyone?

In response to such concerns, Kelly Zvobgo and Meredith Loken (2020) have offered a 'syllabus' by pointing out a plethora of ways that race infuses IR's foundation across key concepts and classic examples. Their piece thereby provides instructors with permission to broach race from the start, or at the very least as an add-on topic. By offering a syllabus rather than a template, they suggest resources. Anyone seeking content or pedagogical advice can follow their links, plus recommendations from other scholars or institutes.

How, then, do we implement this agenda? Since anyone inevitably makes choices in a specific context, I too eschew any template. Instead, I offer two overarching guidelines from my own efforts (over many years, at multiple institutions) to redesign courses that bridge the gap between the mainstream, universalizing format for introductory level courses and the lived experiences of my students. I phrase each guideline as a question, to encourage self-reflection. In response to each question, I offer tips based on my own experiences as a white woman from Chicago.

Caveat: Some of us also have the privileged responsibility of training future generations of academics, both by mentoring teaching assistants and through the design of advanced courses. My nudges apply there too, yet the additional constraints of professional training deserve greater attention than I have space to cover here. Also, complementary or alternative tactics might be more useful in topic-focused courses.

Where Do You Teach?

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Manifestations of racial hierarchies will not be the same everywhere, so how people talk about race—or avoid talking about race—necessarily varies by global location. Each of us navigates this challenge uniquely. Let's start with continental divides. Because I have spent (almost) my entire teaching career in the United States, that is my primary point of reference. Yet my own matter-of-fact tone, which I learned while living in southern Africa, does not easily transfer to the U.S. context. Conversely, when in southern Africa, I recalibrated how I talked about the U.S., because so many people articulated either a superficial Hollywood gloss or a dogmatic class analysis of neo-imperialism.

Tip: Address race or racism in a register that makes sense wherever you reside.

For those of us in the U.S., teaching about imperialism has the potential to profoundly challenge both national narratives and academic truisms about 19th century isolationism and 20th century liberal hegemony. Because controversies can unsettle students, and bias theories warn us about filtering effects, teachers must grapple with how to convey new perspectives. For years, I could broach race at a distance by including content on apartheid and its legacies for human rights. South Africa provided a foil that reduced potential defensiveness, thereby opening opportunities to acknowledge segregation in Chicago or Syracuse. Unfortunately, this content no longer works with current cohorts who know more about Trevor Noah than Nelson Mandela.

Although I dropped any pretense of subtlety in response to the overt racism of the Trump Administration, I still rely on distancing as a tactic to reduce defensiveness among my politically and socio-economically diverse students. Using IR tools, my lectures historicize and internationalize Confederate symbols as a way to stress slavery and the U.S. civil war, thereby connecting to Black Lives Matter protests and symbols of transnational white supremacist movements. This circuitous route also allows me to make British imperialism relevant, from the perspective of a former settler colony. Then, I combine hegemonic stability and power transition theories with an arc of U.S. rise that includes empire within the hemisphere. This semester, I did an anonymous survey to gauge how many students already knew this 19th century history and learned that only half the class did.

Tip: Talk about race as it manifests in the communities where you teach.

As often noted, academics based in the U.S. play a disproportionate role in determining the mainstream. Thus Anglophone voices predominate. I cannot adequately address language issues here, so I merely note the marginalization within North America of Francophone writings and histories. For instance, only because I teach a course on Canadian Politics did I learn of longstanding connections between Haiti and Quebec. Next, I aspire to incorporate the transformative effects of the Haitian Revolution into my IR courses. Meanwhile, I have gradually replaced South Africa with Canada as a foil to generate alternative points of reference. This shift makes sense because Syracuse is located close to the northern border. Elsewhere, the southern border and Spanish may be more salient or acknowledging immigrant communities and their languages may resonate.

Taking cues from Canadian colleagues, I also increasingly incorporate content about indigenous peoples, not even mentioned in most IR textbooks. Specifically, the War of 1812 garners detailed attention in my course, because of its connections to local history and for theoretical reasons. Notably, indigenous allies drop out of state-centric analyses, and I point out that democratic peace theory typically starts in 1815, thereby omitting a noteworthy case of democracies at war. In addition, this attention to local Onondaga (Iroquois) perspectives resonates in campus discussions about double marginalization and goes beyond decolonization as merely a metaphor.

Who Do You Teach?

Incorporating—rather than superficially introducing—more diverse voices is not easy, because of innumerable implicit assumptions about the audience. The majority of students at many U.S. schools are white, typically with scant vocabulary to engage in meaningful conversations about a sensitive subject. Perhaps the goal is solely to broach race in terms that students will accept rather than deflect, but in my experience, most white students seek ways to talk about race and racism. Our classrooms encompass students with a wide range of socio-economic backgrounds, and we should never assume that white students have all-white families.

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Caveat: We know that student evaluations remain riddled with biases. For instructors without tenure, this terrain can be professionally and personally perilous. Observations that I offer here cannot remedy those problems. Rewriting the rules requires a collective effort, beyond these small steps in the context of one type of course. Nor do I claim success. Instead, I share a few ways that I have attempted to parry predictable criticisms, without compromising on core commitments.

Tip: Decenter Yourself.

Many instructors—especially women and minorities—have no choice but to invest substantial time and energy into creating authority to speak. In the early days of my career, women (we were few) would half-joke about wanting to wear ties. Fast forward: a quick peek on academic social media shows that the problem persists, along multiple dimensions. For many white male professors, in contrast, the key take-away may be to recognize their automatic authority. For example, I recall one discussion where the only white man in the group expressed shock at the revelation that female colleagues routinely had to navigate around students presuming to use their first names. Insisting on the use of titles, though, creates other difficulties.

Adding controversial topics to a course highlights irreconcilable challenges between underscoring authority at the same time that we aim to create space for other voices. Some students invariably look to the textbook as the authority. My evaluations, for example, typically contain a smattering of criticism about tangents. Yet, as we know, even textbooks that have made efforts to include gender still omit race. I infer, therefore, that complaints about tangents refer to supplementary coverage in lectures related to race. One basic tactic is to reinforce lecture content with assigned readings, in effect transferring expertise. Finding supplements that calibrate well to a specific audience can still be tough. Fortunately, a plethora of new digital resources create opportunities, including many videos and podcasts that feature diverse images of experts on technical topics.

Tip: Never Get Complacent.

When I taught in Chicago, we often navigated race using the local vocabulary of ethnicity, for better or worse. Also, more than a few students had previously served in the military, sometimes in the wars that we studied in class. Others belonged to diaspora communities connected to conflicts around the world. Consequently, I viewed my students as experts on many topics. Yet, I missed a lot of cues. For example, only in retrospect, after relocating to Syracuse, did I recognize the anomalous status of Puerto Rico and its implications for U.S. imperialism, thanks to occasional queries from students. After so many years of writing and teaching about race, how could I still have been so clueless?

Time for another dose of humility: Decades of teaching students who had served in the military still did not sufficiently sensitize me to trauma in its diversity of forms. Like many colleagues across the country, and probably around the world, I had routinely assigned a short “foreign policy recommendation” memo. During the 2016 primary season, students ranging from Bernie supporters to libertarians had enjoyed the opportunity to pick a candidate and outline an appropriate agenda. The morning after the November 2016 elections, I gazed at many stunned faces in the lecture hall and realized that the final paper needed to change, immediately. It would be cruel to ask people targeted by racist campaign rhetoric to write policy recommendations for an unapologetically bigoted administration. Despite efforts to make my classroom a safe space, I had failed. Since then, I pay closer attention to procedures and assignments, with the aim to eliminate unintended harms.

Postscript

I began to write down these thoughts in the weeks prior to the November 2020 elections and finished in its attenuated aftermath. While my future classroom will still include Trump voters, as does the local community, I am cautiously optimistic that my course can deepen its overt engagement with race and racism without as much political filtering. In addition, structural inequalities revealed by the global coronavirus pandemic, as well as climate change, will provide new insights—for my students and for myself—about the multifaceted effects of race in IR. Yet so much of what I have learned over the years goes beyond content. To engage credibly and constructively, many of us need to un-

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learn professing, in order to reconfigure our courses and classrooms.

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About the author:

Audie Klotz is a Professor of Political Science at Syracuse University, specializing in international relations, global governance, and migration. Her scholarship, teaching, and mentoring have received numerous awards, including multiple career honors from the International Studies Association. She tweets less scripted, more snarky, yet still sincere commentary on these topics @AudieKlotz.