Popular culture as pedagogy in the political theory classroom: reflections from higher education

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Abstract

Political theory, with its abstract reasoning and unfamiliar vocabulary, is a subject that students are often apprehensive about. Whilst popular culture has been employed extensively in the teaching of other areas of political science, such as international relations, I seek to draw attention to its comparative under-use in political theory and argue that it is a highly effective teaching tool for this subject. I use the autoethnographic method to make my case, drawing on my years-long experience in the university classroom, and take this position for three key reasons: the familiar nature of popular culture allows students to more easily acclimate to the political theory classroom, it renders abstract political theory concrete, and provides a useful arena in which to better test the logic of political theory arguments, enhancing student criticality.

Keywords Political theory, Popular culture, Teaching

Introduction

In 2020, the world is rife with uncertainty and worry: global pandemics, climate change, violence against people of colour and rising nationalism are perhaps some of the biggest issues of the day, impacting many countries across the world. Political theory provides us with the conceptual tools to make practical decisions about these issues and thus “the teaching of political theory [can be seen] as a radical and essential civic enterprise” (McWilliams 2015, 193). The teaching of political theory is, therefore, a public good because it helps us understand how the world is and how the world should be (Editorial 2014), which is perhaps more important than ever before. A wide range of techniques have

been employed in the teaching of political theory including metaphor (Best 1984), designing Tumblr output (Kohen 2014), utopian writing (Haddad 2005), simulation (Glasgow 2015), virtual learning environments (Collins et al. 2006), and problematising and teaching outside of the canon (Parrish 2007; Ramgotra 2015).

There are many reasons to undertake research on our teaching and learning within politics and international relations including the improvement of our own practice and the wider spread of theories and techniques. Indeed, *European Political Science* published a symposium on this subject in 2008 (Hale 2008). Despite this, "publishing high-quality research on learning and teaching remains a rather low priority for many research active university staff" (Editorial 2014, 2). In the spirit of contributing to this burgeoning research agenda, employing the autoethnographic method, I argue that the teaching of political theory benefits especially from the use of popular culture as pedagogical technique.

The technique of employing popular culture has already been enthusiastically embraced in other areas of political science, especially international relations. Lobasz and Valeriano (2015), for example, note that IR scholars have been employing this technique for decades (see, e.g. Weldes 2003; Gibert 2016). Within Valeriano's own teaching, he finds that those taught using popular culture methods both perform better and enjoy the course more than those who received an alternative approach. In addition, much research on the use of popular culture as pedagogical tool focuses upon its use in the teaching of IR, e.g. Clapton and Shepherd's (2017) work on Game of Thrones in the classroom. Where this method has been slower to catch on, however, is within teaching of political theory where comparatively little has been written about this technique (a notable exception being Woodcock's (2006) article *The Polis of Springfield: The Simpsons and the Teaching of Political Theory*, though this focuses almost exclusively on examples rather than *why* we might teach political theory in this way). In this article, I assert that this should be extended to political theory also, allowing us to deepen student understanding and criticality of political theory for three key reasons which are set out in the latter part of the article.

Examining the teaching of politics and international relations specifically, Roberts (2018) finds that images encourage active learning, while Holland (2014) makes the same case for videos (see also Ostrom 2002; Mayhew 2020).[1] I focus specifically upon mainstream film and television (with its ease of access and wide variety of likely familiar examples) within the first year undergraduate classroom which, by its nature, examines a broad variety of approaches and concepts; it is in this context that my arguments are made, though some may also be applicable beyond first year or introductory modules. I

[1] For an interesting exploration of the spatial dimensions of screen use in the classroom (and other academic settings) see Decuypere and Simons 2016.

argue that popular culture is useful in teaching political theory firstly because its familiar nature allows students to more easily acclimate to the political theory classroom, secondly because it renders abstract political theory concrete, and thirdly because it provides a useful arena in which to better test the logic of political theory arguments, enhancing student criticality.

I begin in section two by setting out the method used in this article. I establish that critical self-reflection is valuable not just for our own practice but also in stimulating wider discussion and providing others with new perspectives or ideas. I argue that this is especially the case in teaching. The remainder of this article is focused on popular culture as pedagogy, explaining why it is especially suited to political theory. I finish with some reflections on where this discussion might go from here and how COVID19 might change our ability to employ popular culture in political theory teaching.

Autoethnography as method

Biesta (2015, 11) suggests that there are two kinds of education research: projects that focus on causes and effects, and "those who see education as a human event of communication, meaning making and interpretation". We must make space for critical reflections upon teaching (Welch 2000) and in this article I adopt the latter approach, utilising the autoethnographic method. In autoethnography, the researcher employs their own experience as data (Davies and Gannon 2006), typically reflecting upon their experiences in a particular setting. Autoethnography is an established technique within education research and is *especially* well suited to education due to the need for reflexivity in practice; indeed, Trahar (2013) even goes so far as to argue that more educationalists should employ this method. Where autoethnography has been employed within education research its application has been diverse, ranging from the supervisor/supervisee relationship (Trahar 2013) to the teaching of popular writing classes (Howson et al. 2016) to the experience of women of colour as teachers (Hernandez et al. 2015). In this article, my critical reflections focus upon my experiences in teaching political science, especially political theory. Anderson (2006, 378) argues that autoethnographic analysis has five components. Firstly, that the author is firmly embedded in the world being examined, secondly, that they are reflexive in their analysis, thirdly, that they themselves are an important part of analysis and are therefore located within it, fourthly that other sources are included, and fifthly that the analysis is theoretically informed engaging actively with it. I speak to these components below, explaining how I situate myself within my research and how in this article I have drawn upon my experiences as an educator.

I have been teaching seminars across a range of topics relating to political science for the last 5 years, including political theory, international relations, and theories/methods in political science. This

teaching has all taken place at one institution in the United Kingdom. In all cases, I was a seminar tutor and did not deliver lectures because I did not "own" the units myself, so had no control over the syllabus or methods of assessment. Having undertaken my own undergraduate degree at the same institution, I also took as a student the same modules that I now teach, which gives me a unique perspective on both the teaching and learning of this material. In the spirit of reflexivity, I should state at this point that I am thirty and am therefore not far removed from the students in my classes in terms of age. Though it most definitely is not impossible to employ this technique if you are a professor with a thirty-year career-span, it may be easier for those of a similar age to engage with students on popular culture matters as a result of shared social and cultural milieu.

As an educator, I conceptualise reflexivity as a process, rather than something that can be easily switched on or off. As Warren (2011, 139) argues, reflective "practice moves from "what I believe about teaching" to "why I believe what I believe about teaching"' and the seed of this article was sown several years ago whilst I was considering my teaching strategy. I could see that students were struggling with political theory (a subject that is discussed in further below) so I had to consider why this might be the case and what might be done differently such that they better understood. In response to Warren then, the ideas contained herein were gleaned from observations over a number of years in which I changed my strategy and asked my students how they felt about political theory. In short, this article "takes our labour in the classroom as a vital site for investigation" (Warren 2011, 140) and I conceptualise the reflexive nature of autoethnographic research as an extension of wider practices of reflection that I undertake constantly as an educator. These reflective practices include engagement with wider education theory in order to help me consider alternative perspectives and consider how to incorporate best practice into my own teaching, in addition to reflecting on *why* this might be best practice.[2] This wider education theory informs this article and provides valuable support and nuance to the case I make.

Popular culture as pedagogy in the political theory classroom

Removing student apprehension of political theory

I explained above that I have taught units in political theory, international relations and theories/methods in political science research. I have found that each of these subjects has its own challenges but, every year, political theory is the subject that students seem most afraid of. I am not alone in observing this and nor am I alone in considering what underpins this feeling. "Why", as Best (1984, 165) asks, "do students believe that political theory must be an arcane and difficult subject?" Despite the importance of the subject, it is quite clear that students often struggle to understand

[2] As an example of this, I have also published in this area in the journal *Teaching in Higher Education* (Jester 2018).

political theory (as observed also by, for example, Kohen 2014). In my case, there is perhaps an additional layer to this observation: I teach political theory to first year undergraduates (and have taught this course in both the first and second term) who are generally a little unsure of how do "do" university more broadly.

Let us return to Best's question: why do students believe that political theory is so difficult? And what can be done about this? My first answer is that the power disparity between teacher and learner may be larger in political theory subjects and this must be addressed before understanding can begin. This is especially the case when teaching introductory modules in which students typically have little to no previous experience with the subject and—as noted above—may be nervous about starting university more widely. Which concept is which? Are we talking about formal equality of opportunity or fair equality of opportunity, for example? What is the difference between these two concepts that seem at first glance quite similar? Thinking back to my own undergraduate days when I took the course that I now teach—and very much enjoyed—I can remember feeling quite overwhelmed by the texts. This contrasted markedly with other subjects such as international relations where everyone had read about war in the news and where it is easier to at least grasp the examples employed.

It is often the case that students will come to class and tell me that they just couldn't make it through one of the readings as it was too dense or had too many new words. The added difficulty in political theory is that many of the key terms in the classes I teach have different or vaguer meanings in everyday life (Woodcock 2006). Justice is a classic example of this: in my classes we discuss distributive justice (who gets what and why) but at the start of the year students will always have criminal justice in their minds. The first step, then, is in convincing students that, whilst it may be hard to imagine at times, they *are* capable of understanding political theory. As Freire (1983) has explained at length, it is vital to understand the mechanics of power within the classroom and, as educators, we must recognise that we begin political theory classes with a significant power imbalance because we have spent many years inculcating ourselves into the language of political theory, whilst undergraduates (especially those in introductory modules) are facing this challenge anew. In the first instance, then, I begin by recognising this power disparity; I ask myself what students are likely to know already (Best 1984). I suggest that, beyond asking what subject knowledge they have, we can apply this principle to popular culture and assume that they will be familiar with contemporary film and television, for example.[3]

[3] This technique can also double as a tool for teaching about political history if biopics are employed: I have in the past asked students to watch the trailer for *Long Walk to Freedom* (about Nelson Mandela) for the week on civil disobedience and obligation, for example.

One way in which I do this is with respect to the concept of power, which is taught in the first week after a more generic introductory session. Students always struggle with this concept and the associated readings but, as it is considered so foundational, it is not possible to move it to a later week. In order to cement the elements of power (in the case of my unit, what Stephen Lukes refers to as "the three faces") I employ two popular culture artefacts: the film *Mean Girls* (set in a school, the main characters are around 16 years old) and the television programme *House of Cards* (set in US politics and focusing on passing bills, political advisors and elections), which were selected due to their differences. The latter is a good example of what Lukes calls the first and second faces of power, where one can get someone to do something they otherwise would not and where decision-making abilities are removed entirely, such that those one has power over cannot even contribute to discussions. The third face is the one that students typically struggle with more as it focuses on preference-shaping (such that people may not realise power is being exercised) and conflict that has yet to emerge.

To discuss this, I show students the two popular culture artefacts and ask them to apply the three faces of power. It helps that they are likely to have recently emerged from the environment in which *Mean Girls* is set and, as a result, can draw upon their own experience of this space, reminding them how it felt to exist in a space of unspoken yet weighty peer pressure. *House of Cards*, a more obviously "political" arena, functions as a foil for this.[4] Within class, students demonstrate good understanding after exploring this example but, more formally, this example was cited explicitly, within the positive context in a teaching award nomination.

The use of popular culture therefore brings existing student knowledge into the political theory classroom and closes the gap between teacher and learner. Whilst Moore (2015) argues that the use of media in teaching political theory can result in a passive student experience, others have found the opposite (e.g. Holland 2014), which mirrors my experience.

Rendering concrete abstract reasoning through popular culture

Examples

My second answer to this question belongs to Best (1984) herself who explains that most people find the abstract difficult to grasp. Within the teaching of political theory, the educator must find a means of making the key concepts understandable such that the possibility of the abstract does not feel

[4] I use the same contrasting pair technique in other topics, for example, in the week on liberty I use *The Hunger Games* (exploring negative freedom from, i.e. imprisonment) and *Billy Elliot* (looking at the positive freedom a teenage boy seeks in order to cease boxing lessons and attend his desired ballet classes).

overwhelming. Best makes use of metaphor to render the abstract concrete but I instead achieve this through the use of popular culture. To that end, an example: in teaching the work of John Rawls, I was explaining why he rejects particular formulations of justice in order to set up the discussion of his own theory. I explained that Rawls rejects utilitarianism on the basis that, whilst utility may be maximised for the most people, the situation may not be *just*. Met with blank faces, I decided to take a different approach and began by asking who had seen the Batman film *The Dark Knight.* The faces changed from blank to an amused, curious expression that asked "where on earth is she going with this?" I offered a brief summary: in *The Dark Knight Rises,* Gotham City is in turmoil as Batman, district attorney Harvey Dent and the police struggle to tackle a crime wave. The Joker arrives and demands that Batman reveal his true identity, threatening to kill people until this happens. He kills Harvey Dent's fiancée, Rachel Dawes, and angry at the world, Dent goes on a killing spree. Batman then fights and kills Dent. The Joker gloats that the citizens of Gotham will lose all hope once they discover that the heroic Dent was behind so many deaths and Batman decides to take responsibility for Dent's crimes, going on the run. In this situation, I explained to the class, what Batman did may have benefited the whole of Gotham City, maximising utility; however, this comes at a cost of blaming a man for multiple murders that he did not commit, which is likely not a situation that would be acceptable in the worlds we design from behind the veil of ignorance. All of the students in this class had seen this film or had some familiarity with the plot and it provided a useful means of explaining why the theory of utilitarianism might be rejected.

As this example demonstrates, popular culture can therefore be conceptualised as "scaffolding", improving students' ability to understand this material until they need less support and can progress to critique (Daniels 2002). Using popular culture in this way means that students can be given more information about different political theories and their intricacies in an easier-to-digest format. Often the alternative is asking students make intellectual leaps in abstract reasoning they are not yet ready for, which only functions to highlight the power disparity between teacher and learner. The popular culture artefact in the above example conveys complex ideas, enabling students to reach the next stage of learning: critique. I assert that the use of popular culture in the teaching of political theory allows us as educators to cultivate student criticality in a way that would allow them to address the challenges facing us in a contemporary world.

Popular culture and fostering criticality in political theory teaching

With the many and varied challenges touched upon above, criticality is becoming an ever more important subject in the political science classroom. As a result, "political scientists must re-examine what we are doing inside and outside of the classroom to foster students' and communities' growth in political knowledge, democratic skills, and democratic values and habits" (McCartney 2019).

I argue that popular culture can be employed within the political theory classroom such that we can move beyond understanding to foster student criticality. Criticality is conceptualised here as the "judicious use of scepticism, tempered by experience, such that it is productive of a more satisfactory solution to, or insight into, the problem at hand" (McPeck 2016, 5). That is, the questioning and evaluation of existing norms, in this case the canon of political theory and the norms of the social world that function as empirical examples. Popular culture provides a useful means of quantifying, comparing and evaluating different concepts within political theory, a process that can only begin once understanding has been achieved. Popular culture artefacts thus become a means of both applying and problematising the key concepts of the political theory classroom.

Popular culture is one of the main ways through which students learn about the world (Clapton and Shepherd 2017); the use of popular culture also makes it possible to get students to problematise the assumptions that this might have engendered in them. A classic example from my classes on inequality revolves around the question of *what* we are trying to equalise: is it happiness? Money? Time? This discussion can have a long duration but, often someone will provide a pop culture example that allows us to ask new questions that may be more helpful. Recently, this example has been *The Wolf of Wall Street*, a dramatised story about stockbroker Jordan Belfort, and someone will ask: "does he really need that much money?" Thus, a film that appears to glamourise the accumulation of mass wealth becomes an opportunity for me to move the conversation away from equality and into justice, which instead asks how we decide who gets what. Indeed, popular culture is especially useful in this endeavour owing to its propensity to depict extreme situations. As Freire explains, this allows students to "develop their power to perceive critically the way they exist in the world with which and in which they find themselves; they come to see the world not as a static reality, but as a reality in process, in transformation" (Freire 1983, 83).

This mirrors Holland's (2014) finding that popular culture is especially useful for fostering student criticality, in his case in the field of international relations. Here, among other examples, Holland (2014, 269–270) employed an episode of *The West Wing* to engender conversations about the September 11 2001 attacks:

> Students [participants] noted that this genre of video was "crucial for… making students engage with the topic critically" and was "a way of teaching… critical thinking". Importantly, in the development of both analytical and critical viewing skills, students reported being able and keen to transfer these skills outside the classroom, as they successfully went from collaborative analysis and critique in lectures and seminars to an independent and individual development and replication of these techniques at home.

Like Holland, I have also employed popular culture artefacts to teach about the "War on Terror", but from a political theory perspective focusing on nations (using the television programme *Homeland*) to deconstruct ideas of community, self and other. As Holland (2014) has argued, there is great scope to undertake further research on the pedagogical value of popular culture in the teaching of politics and international relations and I have aimed here to contribute to this discussion by drawing it further into the field of political theory.

Reflections upon the challenges of employing popular culture in higher education teaching

Your ability to employ popular culture to narrow the power disparity between teachers and learners of political theory is, to some extent, dependent on *who* you are teaching. Internationalisation has become an important concept within higher education policy and practice (Harrison and Peacock 2009; see also Editorial 2014). As a result of prolonged war, increasing numbers of refugees are entering European higher education systems (Kontowski and Leitsberger 2018)[5] and institutions are seeking to attract ever larger numbers of students from overseas; it is important that we as educators design our classes for *all* of our students. Alienating your international students with popular culture examples that they do not understand will only increase the power disparity between teacher and learner, as well as creating new power disparities between learners.

This can be mitigated somewhat by providing popular culture examples in advance of the class or watching clips from a film or television programme together as a group as particular points are made in class discussion. Alternatively, you might pair students up and get them to discuss the example with one another. Domestic popular culture may be beneficial to international students as it can help them learn more about their new country of residence—this is especially the case when students may be arriving from countries in which there is limited exposure to other cultures, e.g. China. The use of popular culture in the analysis of political theory makes clear to students that the definition of "political" is almost certainly wider than they originally thought, whatever their starting assumptions might be.

The use of popular culture in the political theory classroom also provides a good opportunity for us to reflect more critically on our own practice as researchers and educators. What are considered by the mainstream to be the core political theorists (e.g. Dahl 2005; Lukes 2004; Rawls 2009; Nozick 1974

[5] *The European Education Research Journal* dedicated a whole special issue to the education of refugees in recognition of this fact in 2018.

and others) are almost exclusively white men, typically from privileged backgrounds.[6] As Mills has argued, there is an overwhelming whiteness in political theory (Mills 2004), and it must be decolonised [though he does recognise that political theory has made greater strides than political philosophy (Mills 2015)]. This is a topic that is receiving ever more attention from campaigns such as Women Also Know Stuff and Rhodes Must Fall (Jester 2018) and, in my experience, is a fact that students are increasingly raising in class and discussing in feedback forms.

Bringing popular culture into the political theory classroom allows us to introduce a wider range of voices, which has a notable positive effect. Tisdell and Thompson (2007, 651) conducted a study into the use of popular culture in the adult learning classroom, aiding students in "finding alternative narratives for themselves; expanded thinking about "others" of a different race, gender or sexual orientation; further interaction and analysis of social relations both in their own lives and in their teaching" (see also Ranieri and Fabbro 2016). The use of popular culture as pedagogy may, therefore, be especially useful for casualised staff [an ever-growing group (University and College Union 2019)] teaching classes in which they have no control over the syllabus and cannot make changes to the formal reading lists in which white men are over-represented.[7]

Conclusion

There are multiple different techniques for teaching any subject. In my years of experience across different subjects in the same field, students can struggle more with certain subjects than others. As numerous people (e.g. Best 1984; Kohen 2014) have pointed out, one such subject that students appear to struggle with in particular is political theory and they do so for a variety of reasons. This article has argued that political theory benefits especially from the use of popular culture as pedagogy, mitigating the difficulties that students might have with this subject in particular. Recognising that there is a limited amount of work on this subject already, this article aims to underpin this discussion with some theoretical grounding and push our thinking forward.

First, it can be hard to persuade students that they have the knowledge and ability to understand and thrive in a political theory course, especially within introductory modules. They find the terminology inaccessible and overwhelming in its volume — a difficult combination—as very few students in my classes have studied the key concepts of political theory before higher education. Popular culture as

[6] Those with the ability to make changes to their syllabus have no excuse for all-white or all-male reading lists, even in political theory. My suggestion is, I acknowledge, a very imperfect sticking plaster for a much wider problem that is sorely in need of greater attention.

[7] Women political theorists are more likely to place other women on their list of "Scholars Who Have Had the Greatest Impact on Political Theory in the Past 20 Years". Comprising 26% of political theorists, however, the balance remains skewed in favour of men, thus impacting the mainstream canon (Ackelsberg 2010, 281).

pedagogy aids in persuading students that they can conquer their political theory syllabus because they are reminded that they do have knowledge. Employing and valuing popular culture within the political theory classroom provides students with the opportunity to bring their knowledge in and make a contribution.

Second, popular culture renders concrete the abstract reasoning at the heart of the subject, making clearer what the teacher is referring to and how these concepts might work in practice. Third, demonstrating to students that they *can* understand political theory—and well—makes it easier to get them to apply and critique it. In providing students with examples from popular culture I usually find myself presenting extreme scenarios that are either impossible or very unlikely in day-to-day life. As a result, popular culture artefacts are often simpler canvases upon which students can "try out" political theory and develop a more critical understanding of the concepts being used.

Discussions around the use of popular culture in teaching are still in their early stages with respect political theory, at least within academic publishing. There are, as a result, a number of elements that would benefit from further investigation. Firstly, there is a need for more empirical evaluations of the kind found within articles about international relations teaching. This article has adopted an autoethnographic approach as this was felt to be the best means of setting out the points made, but other investigations might consider focusing on surveys, interviews with students or even experiments to compare attainment.[8] These techniques should not be used uncritically, however. Popular culture (of all varieties, not just film and television) is itself already political and its use cannot be divorced from the power hierarchies in which it is created. Beyond a call for more evidence around the use of popular culture in the political theory classroom, then, I would also encourage further thought about the examples we use and how these might themselves be political and suggest that further research in this vein might be fruitful.

It is now mid-2020 and higher education institutions around the world are grappling with the problem of a global COVID19 pandemic. Many, like my own institution, chose to move teaching online. It is unclear what universities might choose to do in the next academic year, but it is a strong possibility that at least some teaching will be conducted online. In this context, there may be more opportunities to employ popular culture within the teaching of political theory (and more widely) as students would find it easier to access videos during virtual classes than they would in face-to-face classes where some do not bring a laptop. Other instructors may also opt for asynchronous modes of delivery whereby students learn at their own pace. In cases like this, it would be possible to include popular

[8] As Duchatelet et al. (2020) note there are a variety of ways that this sort of research might be done in order to move conversation forward.

culture artefacts that students can watch when it suits them, before turning to other class materials (instead of needing to pause a class to watch a video). From pandemics, to the collection of further evidence, to its political nature, there is much to consider with respect to the use of popular culture in the teaching of political theory, and it is my hope that this article has to some degree moved this discussion forward.

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