Using short-form student videos to widen the canon of political thought

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Abstract
A perennial problem for teachers of political thought is to decide what thinkers to include in the required course readings. In many cases, teachers have come to rely on an established Western canon as they seek to build a shared disciplinary identity, impart key theoretical insights and provide common points of reference. Increasingly, however, calls have been made to include more non-Western, female and otherwise marginalised voices. In response, this article presents and evaluates an interactive group video assignment by which the students are asked to identify one, hitherto excluded, political thinker and formulate arguments for his or her inclusion in the course readings. As a collaborative exercise, higher-level comprehension, analysis and synthesis are encouraged while the shared ‘canon’ of political thought is widened.

Keywords
active learning, comparative political theory, critical thinking, curriculum, small groups, technology

After the first months of crisis management, the pandemic opened a window for pedagogical innovation and the rethinking of old practices in higher education (García-Morales et al. 2021). As online platforms temporarily replaced classroom teaching in many countries, new possibilities for collaborative learning emerged, and it seems important to capitalise as much as possible on these even after returning to more traditional forms of campus teaching.

The aim of this article is to present and evaluate one such pedagogical innovation triggered by the sudden and unexpected move to online teaching. Being teachers of political theory, we have long grappled with the ‘canon problem’ (Parrish 2007; Schaffer 2015) of deciding what political thinkers should be included in the required course readings. Traditionally, readings...
for introductory courses in political theory have been based almost exclusively on an established Western canon (think Plato, Hobbes, Locke, etc.) as teachers have sought to build a shared disciplinary identity, impart key theoretical insights and provide common points of reference. However, over time, this state of affairs has become deeply unsatisfactory and, as such, it has become increasingly urgent to expand the canon with non-conventional sources and include more non-Western, female and otherwise marginalised voices (Stuurman 2000). In addition, there is often a pedagogical need to better align the teaching in political theory with the interests and concerns of the students here and now. In response, we have designed a group video assignment aimed at fostering critical reflection about the criteria used for inclusion and exclusion of political thinkers while more fully drawing on the students’ pre-understanding and priorities. Before elaborating on the format of this particular assignment, we would like to briefly review the broader discussion concerning the role of canon in political thought since this background is important for understanding the purpose of the assignment. Finally, since we have been able to implement this assignment in our political theory classes for three consecutive semesters, we conclude by offering some reflections on the results of the formal course evaluations.

The canon problem

When studying political science at university, almost all students are required to take an introductory course in political theory. The purpose of this course is to lay a conceptual and theoretical foundation for later studies in what has otherwise become a discipline increasingly focused on empirical explanation (Kaufman-Osborn 2010). Almost everywhere, courses in political theory feature a number of ‘usual suspects’, ranging from Socrates and Plato in the ancient world to the contemporary revival of political theory associated with John Rawls and Robert Nozick. Though this list, or canon, may include a few women, be it Mary Wollstonecraft or Hannah Arendt, the absolute majority on the list are Western male political thinkers such as Thomas Hobbes, John Locke and John Stuart Mill, thinkers that have essentially come to define what is considered the ‘core’ of political theory.

While this approach has some obvious advantages, not the least that it contributes to a shared disciplinary identity with common points of reference for political scientists across universities, the disadvantages are no less obvious in a time increasingly cognizant about its own gender, race and
class biases. Nevertheless, the ‘canon problem’, of deciding what thinkers students should be required to learn about, defies a straightforward solution. While the number of thinkers could theoretically be expanded indefinitely, student time and resources will always remain limited, meaning that some kind of selection has to be made, one way or the other. As teachers of political theory, we also tend to think that some theoretical insights are more important than others in relation to our overall discipline, further emphasising the need for selection criteria. While this may be taken as an excuse for simply maintaining the status quo and avoiding stoking cultural polarisation in the classroom (Santos 2020), we believe that the need for selection criteria rather brings up multiple problems and challenges that need to be addressed.

One such problem, and one that is especially pertinent in the context of introductory courses, is raised by James Farr (2006). In his brief exposition of the canon of political thought, Farr highlights that the canon and its inner structure have all too often come to be understood as ‘natural kinds or found objects’, rather than what they truly are: a collection of texts that has been curated after-the-fact (2006: 230). Precisely because the canonical texts have achieved status as such first in hindsight, the canon is an artefact much more modern than its constitutive texts. It is easy to see that this type of naturalisation of the canon is particularly problematic in relation to teaching, seeing as a central aim of higher education is precisely to develop students’ abilities to critically assess and apply course concepts (Butcher 2021; Karlsson 2020). This type of learning is clearly not facilitated by accepting and reciting the established canon at face value.

For teachers of political theory who want to foster a more critical attitude towards the readings among their student groups, some criticisms of the established Western canon seem particularly important to bear in mind. In his overview of the critiques levelled against the canon, Siep Stuurman (2000) identifies two overarching categories into which he argues that the majority of said critiques can be sorted: a ‘democratic’ or a ‘methodological’ one. The former of the two is arguably the most straightforward and starts from the notion that the canon is ‘selective and incomplete’ (Stuurman 2000: 152), resulting in a failure to reflect the vast diversity of historical and contemporary debates within political theory. In other words, many voices and perspectives (female and non-Western ones being the most cited examples) are effectively excluded from the theoretical debate reflected in the canon. Since this exclusion is systematic, the canon paints a skewed (or
Indeed undemocratic picture of the history of political thought, emphasising some groups of thinkers while silencing others.

The methodological critique resembles the democratic one in so far as it questions the extent to which the canon provides an accurate account of the theoretical dialogues it is meant to represent. But whereas the democratic critique does this by focusing on the contents of the canon itself, the methodological critique instead homes in on how the canon has typically been treated by later scholars. As Stuurman (2000: 157) points out, there has been a strong tendency to approach the canonical texts with too little concern about the historical and political circumstances under which they were produced, ‘thus replacing their original context with the anticipation of a future they could not possibly foresee’. In other words, since the canon is both constructed and approached with the benefit of hindsight, it is not so much a representation of intellectual history ‘as it really happened’ as it is an account of how scholars, since then, have come to interpret said history. We see, then, that this critique is closely related to Farr’s (2006) warnings about a naturalised canon which we have previously outlined.

Furthermore, the theorising provided by scholars and traditions critical of the established canon of political theory typically still engages with, and draws upon, said canon in some way or another. An important example of this is provided by Linda Zerilli (2006), and her discussion of feminism’s relationship to the political theory canon. In brief, Zerilli argues that feminists – while typically deeming the Western canon to be ‘more or less bankrupt for the development of feminist political theory’ (seeing as the canonical texts almost exclusively represent a male perspective on politics) – still have to acknowledge that the canon functions as ‘a valuable resource for political thinking that we can hardly do without’ in that it is ‘in important ways constitutive of our political vocabulary’ (2006: 106). Obviously, the established canon also functions as a sort of backdrop or point of departure for large parts of these critical literatures in that it is the main target for their critical projects. There are, in other words, certainly no easy escapes from the canon – even for theorists who advocate such an escape. This is one of the reasons that the canon, despite its many flaws and drawbacks, has remained at centre stage of political theory.

Here we have mainly reviewed the role of canon within political theory as a scholarly subfield. As hinted at earlier, however, its role is even more predominant within political science as an undergraduate subject. At this point, it is important to underline that this predominance is not born from
an unawareness among teachers regarding the many problems previously described. On the contrary, teachers of political theory have long been aware of the various downsides of canon-based teaching but still struggle to find a valid alternative approach (see Stuurman 2000: 148). In large part, this comes from a belief that, ultimately, the pedagogical ‘costs’ of relying on the canon are outweighed by the benefits of doing so. However, there are also social and institutional factors at play that seem to hamper those teachers who nevertheless strive to move beyond the canonical texts. For example, Schaffer (2015: 435) mentions concerns about one’s reputation among colleagues (who might be suspicious about non-mainstream titles being added to the required readings) as well as a lack of resources needed to be able to find and relate alternative texts (in terms of time, knowledge, and so on).

There is, in other words, a well-documented need for teachers of political theory to find ways to provide their students with a more nuanced view of the field, without completely disregarding the established canon (which would be to throw out the baby with the bathwater). Ultimately, however, this often means little more than that teachers try to contextualise and problematise the canon and its origins or that a few new voices are added on the margins.

**The assignment**

As such, recognising the pressing need to broaden the canon but also the constant pedagogical challenge of making the teaching appear relevant to the students, we designed a group video assignment for our jointly taught political theory course starting in the fall of 2020. Given the limitations imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic, with all teaching taking place online, we were forced to quickly replace our classroom collaborative learning activities with new online forms of learning. Seeing this as a window of opportunity and experimentation, especially as we were allowed to make exemptions from the course syllabus, we decided on a two-stage assignment.

In the first step, the students, working in groups of four to five students, were asked to record a five-minute video in which they identify one, hitherto excluded, political thinker and formulate arguments for his or her inclusion in the course readings. In the videos, the students are expected to spell out not only the reasoning behind their choice of political thinker but also what criteria they have used for inclusion in the canon of political
Using short-form student videos to widen the canon of political thought

thought. In the second step, all students watch all the other students’ videos before being individually tasked with writing a response paper to two of the videos, reflecting on the different arguments presented. As teachers, we decided to give feedback primarily on the individual response papers as this allowed us to engage more directly with each student.

In the videos, the students can decide if they want everyone in the group to be seen (perhaps by recording a Zoom session with a shared PowerPoint presentation) or if only one student will present the arguments. What is important for us as teachers is that all students work together to identify a thinker and formulate the different arguments.

Pedagogical value and student evaluation

Through the assignment, it is our belief that higher-level comprehension, analysis and synthesis are encouraged as the students are asked to think critically about what they learn and examine what criteria have been used to decide on what is considered ‘important’. In the way the assignment is set up, coming relatively early in the course, it also means that the students must first fully familiarise themselves with the course readings (in order to be able to discern what thinkers are not already included) and thus also develop an understanding for disciplinary boundaries.

This naturally brings up the question of what new thinkers the students have chosen for their videos over the three semesters that we have used this assignment. To our great joy, the list of new thinkers is very long, ranging from the English protofeminist Mary Astell (1666–1731) to the Ethiopian moral philosopher Zera Jacob (1599–1692), meaning that the students are exposed to a large number of thinkers that they would otherwise not have become acquainted with. In some cases, students have chosen individuals who are not perhaps considered political thinkers, for instance, Ruth Bader Ginsburg, but such probing of the disciplinary boundaries may in fact be beneficial as it helps the students to better situate political science in relation to other disciplines. Thinking in more theoretical terms about the assignment (Laurillard 2002), we believe that there is a clear pedagogical value in the modulation that takes place as the students negotiate with each other what thinker to choose based on their own pre-understanding and priorities. Similarly, in the second step, the students get a chance to reflect again on these choices when watching the videos created by the other groups.
Obviously, the videos differ substantially in format and quality. Though some students have struggled initially with the technical side of the assignment, the ubiquitous nature of smartphones and, over the course of the pandemic, greater experience with different forms of collaborative software have made it relatively easy for the students to record the videos and upload them.

Turning to the student evaluations, we have reviewed three sets of course evaluations with an average response rate of 28 per cent (n=49). Overwhelmingly, the students considered the assignment to be worthwhile and that it significantly contributed to their learning in the course. However, some students expressed frustration, both at the lack of instruction of what counted as a ‘political thinker’ and that they had to contact the other group members through email (due to COVID-19 restrictions, we could not have any classes on campus). In the latest course evaluation, one student wrote: ‘I think the canon assignment is of great value, especially in a country like Sweden where I think you generally have quite a lot of respect and trust in authorities, to start by being forced to question what is being taught, rather than just absorbing it’. Similarly, another student wrote: ‘I think the canon assignment should be included also the next semester as it is important to problematise the content of the education’.

Based on this student feedback but also our own assessment of the pedagogical value of the assignment, it is our intention to keep the assignment even after returning to campus teaching. Depending on the number of students, we have discussed the possibility of organising some kind of ‘movie night’ with the students when we watch all the videos together, possibly followed by cross-group discussions. In conclusion, we believe that, as an aggregate, the videos produced through this assignment expose the students to radically different historical moments and cultural formations, yet simultaneously build on their own interests and curiosities in ways that we alone as teachers would not be able to facilitate.

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