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Teaching Critical Approaches to International Relations

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 Introduction by Lucian M. Ashworth, Memorial University

I very much enjoyed reading the four contributions to this roundtable. The theme that runs through all four is the different journeys, taken by different people, that nonetheless led to similar conclusions about how we can teach International Relations (IR). Underlying all this, for me at least, is a disquieting feeling that, over the last few decades, there has been a growing disconnect between IR as it is practiced as a scholarly community of researchers, and IR as it is expected to be taught in courses, especially first-year classes. The expectations of teaching are often most glaringly demonstrated by the intellectual iron boxes found in IR textbooks. No wonder that Zenel Garcia in the Roundtable concludes that “I have resorted to not assigning textbooks,” while Zeynep Gulsah Capan has chosen a text that does not reproduce “the central ‘myths’ of the discipline and its Eurocentrism.”

Thus, while each essay has the quality of a personal story, the contributors are looking for answers to a common set of problems with IR teaching, and it is this that unites them. In the rest of this introduction I do two things. First, I focus briefly on what I think that common set of problems is. Second, I drill down on how each of the contributors confronts these problems in their own narratives, and why the sharing of our stories about teaching is essential both for the teaching of IR and for the intellectual health of IR as a field of research.

One of the common complaints I hear from people teaching introduction to IR courses is how much time they need to spend on the paradigms in IR, and how that often hinders their attempts to teach topics that they consider more cutting edge and of interest to the student body. Indeed, the ability to sort theorists into neat little boxes marked ‘realist,’ ‘liberal,’ and ‘constructivist’ is, it seems, regarded as a common student rite of passage that is underscored by the usual layout of textbooks. What is more, it is the expected story, meaning that colleagues, textbook authors and even many students feel that this coverage is necessary.¹

But is it? Many may be surprised to learn that this two or three-part division into paradigms (more are added in more comprehensive textbooks) only dates from the 1980s. The idea of paradigms in IR was a combination of a sense of theoretical muddle in 1960s and 1970s IR, and the then popularity of Thomas Kuhn’s idea of paradigm found in his *Structure of Scientific Revolutions*.² Starting in the late 1970s, IR stock-takers attempted to create order out of the many approaches to IR by defining a clear set of paradigms, and then giving them a history through the idea of three discipline-defining debates. The final debate, the inter-paradigm debate, was constructed as an ongoing debate between three paradigms: neo-realism, liberalism, and structuralism. Other stock-takers added a fourth debate, where new approaches such as post-structuralism and feminism further expanded the number of battling paradigms, while also adding a foundationalist versus anti-foundationalist element to the story.³

The debates in the 1980s and early 1990s about the structure of IR theory were often sophisticated and nuanced, but by the time the idea of paradigms filtered through as a popular self-image, and then got its way into textbooks, it had been simplified down into realism, liberalism, and (sometimes) constructivism—the last

¹ My fuller take on this issue can be found at Lucian M. Ashworth, “The Trouble with Textbooks,” *Dregs of Romulus*, 19 October 2017, <https://lucianashworth.com/2017/10/19/the-trouble-with-textbooks/>.

² Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962).

³ For a fuller treatment of this story see: Lucian M. Ashworth, “A Historiographer’s View: Rewriting the History of International Thought,” in Andreas Gofas, Inanna Hamati-Ataya, and Nicholas Onuf, eds., *The Sage Handbook of the History, Philosophy and Sociology of International Relations* (London: Sage, 2018), 529-541.

replacing neo-Marxist structuralism, and being a nod to the idea of a fourth debate over knowledge and foundations. The problem is that while this new common sense required that all first-year students be told about these discreet paradigms, the research side of the field was moving away from ideas of paradigms as an ordering principle. Journals, special sections of scholarly associations, and book series rarely openly employ paradigms, or a specific paradigm from the textbooks, as a theoretical framework, although they may reference a particular paradigm by name when delineating a school or set of theories that they are using. The last Teaching, Research, and International Policy Project (TRIP) survey of US IR scholars asked the question “which of the following best describes your approach to the study of IR?” 18% said realism, 16% constructivism, and 14.5% said liberalism. 36%, though, said that the “do not use paradigmatic analysis.”⁴ While there is some residual loyalty to the labels, the idea of a field divided into paradigms is not a reality for many research active scholars in IR.

So, here is the problem: we have a tendency in teaching to fall back on the categories of the 1980s, but our discipline has moved on from paradigms when it comes to actual research. Yet, the requirement to teach realism, liberalism and constructivism makes it harder to add recent innovative work on race, postcolonialism, gender, Earth system, and other critical approaches that are currently making major contributions to scholarship. While it is not uncommon to see these new approaches lumped in to constructivism—treating the third category as a catch-all critical box—the reality is that the obsession with teaching paradigms means that we give undue time to both realism and liberalism, while steering our teaching away from some of the most interesting cutting-edge research.

What unites all four of these contributions to this teaching critical approaches in IR roundtable is an attempt to move beyond the old, tattered flags of the 1980s inter-paradigm debate, and to find new ways of teaching critical approaches to IR and security studies. Zeynep Gulsah Capan emphasizes this when stressing the importance of teaching outside of disciplinary knowledge (a reference, perhaps, to the standard paradigms). Instead the focus in teaching turns to the two key questions of what is knowledge, and what is theorizing? In different forms, these two questions resonate in all of the contributions to the roundtable. Here, issues that are left unexplored in the paradigmized forms of IR theorizing are brought to the centre stage of teaching.

In Priya Dixit’s teaching the starting point is the individualized narrative. Here theorizing begins from where we are as scholars and students, which brings in topics often rendered invisible, such as race. The first step in teaching shifts from the exercise of putting existing scholars into their paradigm boxes, to the grounding of IR (more specifically for Dixit, the field of security studies) in our lived experiences. This approach makes students aware of the politics of knowledge production, and leads to the observing and identifying of gaps, such as the absence of the state in discussions of terrorism. This concentration on the individualized narratives of both instructor and student also helps subvert the idea that ‘IR’ is something that happens ‘out there’ to disembodied entities from which we have an objective distance. Instead, it underscores how IR is practiced all around us, and is reproduced and challenged as part of everyday life.

The issues of silences and individualized narratives are covered from a complementary direction by Zenel Garcia, who starts with the question of “who gets to ‘speak’ security and who is silenced, ignored, or repressed from speaking.” Garcia begins with a discussion on reality that then leads to questions of how knowledge is created. This then leads to a comparison between ‘traditional’ and critical approaches that in turn allows for a clear definition of the meaning of critical approaches. This step-by-step approach eases students into an understanding

⁴ TRIP Snap Poll 17 Report, March 2022. <https://trip.wm.edu/data/our-surveys/snap-polls/Snap-Poll-17-Report.pdf>.

of what it means to be critical. One thought I had while reading this contribution, which is admittedly tangential to the narrative of Garcia's teaching, is how the traditional approaches themselves became traditional? Perhaps revealing my own interests and individual narrative rooted in the history of international thought, I was struck by how both liberalism and realism in the past were themselves critical approaches. Liberal internationalism had begun as a late-nineteenth century new liberal intellectual insurgency that criticized the traditional *realpolitik* and classical liberal complacency of its day. Similarly, the early forms of realism in the first half of the twentieth century (especially in the forms it takes with E. H. Carr, Frederick L. Schuman, Reinhold Niebuhr and the early Hans J. Morgenthau⁵) share a critical edge both philosophically and in terms of foreign policy. Yet, by the 1980s, the paradigmized versions of realism and liberalism had lost that critical edge and become decidedly traditional. The question of the dynamics that lead yesterday's critical to become tomorrow's canonical should perhaps be left for another day.

The issue of the everyday in thinking about IR is the focus of Georg Löfflmann's contribution. Here the emphasis shifts to the relationship between politics and popular culture, or more specifically the Pentagon-Hollywood liaison. Löfflmann sees this relationship as a Foucauldian "regime of truth," where "knowledge and power intersect in establishing particular discourses as legitimate and generally accepted versions of social reality." While exploring a key nexus in the creation and justification of United States foreign policy, this focus also illuminates an important turn in more critical approaches to IR and security studies: the move to other sources of knowledge in understanding and teaching IR. Zeynep Gulsah Capan takes this in another direction with her first course on monsters ('Zombies, Vampires and Witches'), and the second on science fiction and fantasy ('Speculative Fiction and Theorizing').

In a way this turn to film, folklore, and fiction is also a revolt against the paradigmized IR of the 1980s.⁶ The exercise of filling the paradigm boxes was also about populating the field with canonical scholarly writers that fit the pre-prepared definitions. This focus on specific scholarly works, found in certain books and articles written by specific writers, left other forms of knowledge, particularly those embedded in popular culture, outside of the theoretical frame. This left a yawning space in our analysis of IR, but it also meant that our discussions of IR were increasingly alienated from a student body for whom their everyday experience of global politics came from a multiplicity of sources and forms of knowledge. Indeed, the teaching practices of all four of the contributors to this roundtable address this issue in different ways, and via different media.

Overall, the discussions of teaching and course structures in this roundtable give me hope for the future of IR. There is a whole cottage industry, often appearing as panel themes at gatherings like the International Studies Association or as special issues in major journals, on the impending death of IR and IR theorizing. More often than not these pieces are rooted in a paradigmized vision of IR that dates from the 1980s. If by the death of IR they mean the end of the road for the inter-paradigm debate framing, then these articles and special issues are probably right. Yet, in human history the collapse of an organized way of living is usually also the process by which new ways of organizing ourselves are able to come to the fore: an end is also a beginning. These

⁵ E. H. Carr, *The Twenty Years' Crisis* (London: Macmillan, 1939); Frederick L. Schuman, *International Politics: An Introduction to the Study of the Western State System* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1933); Reinhold Niebuhr, *Moral Man. Immoral Society* (New York: Scribner, 1932); and Hans J. Morgenthau, *Scientific Man vs Power Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1946).

⁶ This juxtaposition of folklore and IR research and teaching is covered in the work of Kathryn Starnes. See her "The Case for Creative Folklore in Pedagogical Practice," *Art & the Public Sphere* 10:2 (2021): 225-232. See also Kathryn Starnes, *Fairy Tales and International Relations: A Folklorist Reading of IR Textbooks* (London: Taylor & Francis, 2016).

contributions give me hope for the future because, in their discussions of particular ways of handling teaching in particular courses at particular institutions, they show us how we might move on to an IR that is more in keeping with the realities of our scholarship and our students.

Participants:

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Priya Dixit is Associate Professor of Political Science (Security Studies) at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University (Virginia Tech) at Blacksburg, United States. She is the author of *The "State" and "Terrorists" in Nepal and Northern Ireland: The Social Construction of State Terrorism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2015); co-author of *Critical Terrorism Studies: An Introduction to Research Methods* (New York: Routledge, 2011); co-editor of *Critical Methods in Terrorism Studies* (New York: Routledge, 2015) and author of 5 articles on issues ranging from critical methods in security studies to U.S. countering violent extremism policies. Her research interests are terrorism and extremism, qualitative research methods, and interconnections of popular culture and global politics.

Zenel Garcia is an Associate Professor of Security Studies in the Department of National Security and Strategy at the U.S. Army War College. His research focuses on the intersection of international relations theory, security, and geopolitics. Specifically, how interpretations of security and the geopolitical environment shape the discursive and empirical processes of regional formation and transformation in the Indo-Pacific and Eurasia. He is the author of *China's Western Frontier and Eurasia: The Politics of State and Region-Building* (New York: Routledge, 2021) and *China's Military Modernization, Japan's Normalization and the South China Sea Territorial Disputes* (Gewerbstrasse: Palgrave MacMillan, 2019). He is currently working on the ways in which securitization discourses are being mobilized by key states for the purposes of region-building, leading to the transition from the Asia-Pacific to the Indo-Pacific regional construct.

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The issue of how to teach ‘critical’ perspectives within the discipline of International Relations has been an ongoing debate.⁷ One of the issues predominantly brought up is the linear nature of the theory syllabuses that focus on the ‘isms’ starting with realism and liberalism and moving on to what are considered ‘critical’ perspectives such as constructivism, poststructuralism, feminism and postcolonialism.⁸ The discussion has focused on how to teach IR without reproducing the central ‘myths’ of the discipline and its Eurocentrism.⁹ For example, the recent edited volume by Arlene Tickner and Karen Smith entitled *International Relations from the Global South* addresses the need for “a textbook that challenges the implicit notions inherent in most existing IR textbooks and, instead, presents international relations as seen from different vantage points in the global South.”¹⁰ The contributors to the volume engage with questions such as; “how has the global South dealt with the epistemic violence that is mainstream IR? What is the meaning of sovereignty to those who have experiences colonialism and imperialism? How can we re-imagine the “international” when the global North sets its norms, institutions, and practices?”¹¹

This essay aims to add to this discussion through the example of two courses that aim to widen the discussion with respect to how knowledge is constructed and what counts as theorizing. The first course, entitled “Zombies, Vampires and Witches: Imaginations of Other Worlds” aims to open for discussion how knowledge and what we consider ‘real’ get constructed. The second course, which is entitled “Speculative Fiction and Theorizing,” aims to widen what is considered theorizing through a discussion of speculative fiction. Both courses question the relationship between knowledge, fact, fiction, and truth and the hierarchies established between them.

The abstract of “Zombies, Vampires and Witches: Imaginations of Other Worlds” is as follows:

What is a monster? How did the monstrous get rearticulated throughout history? What were the different categories through which the monstrous became constructed? How does the dichotomy of life/death become articulated through categories of ‘undead’? How does the unknown become articulated through the prevalent order of knowledge of the ‘time’? How were new technologies such as cartography utilized to map out the ‘unknown’ and how were ‘discoveries’ incorporated into the ‘European’ system of knowledge? The aim is

⁷ Devika Sharma, “Mapping International Relations Teaching and Research in Indian Universities,” *International Studies* 46:1-2 (2009): 69-88; Jonas Hagmann and Thomas J. Biersteker, “Beyond the Published Discipline: Toward a Critical Pedagogy of International Studies,” *European Journal of International Relations* 20:2 (2014): 291-315; Aaron Ettinger, “Scattered and Unsystematic: The Taught Discipline in the Intellectual Life of International Relations,” *International Studies Perspectives* 21:3 (2020): 338-361.

⁸ Meera Sabaratnam, Kerem Nisancioglu, and Martin Weber, “Teaching IR Globally, Part II,” *Contexto Internacional* 42 (2020): 376-415. The series of articles in *Contexto Internacional* present a discussion on how to teach IR globally and includes examples of syllabuses used by the contributors in teaching; Heloise Weber, Navnita Chadha Behera, and Ole Wæver, “Teaching IR Globally, Part IV,” *Contexto Internacional* 42 (2020): 461-500.

⁹ Benjamin de Carvalho, Halvard Leira, and John M. Hobson, “The Big Bangs of IR: The Myths that Your Teachers Still Tell You about 1648 and 1919,” *Millennium – Journal of International Studies* 39:3 (2011): 735–758.

¹⁰ Arlene Tickner and Karen Smith, eds., *International Relations from the Global South: Worlds of Difference* (Routledge, 2020): 3.

¹¹ Tickner and Smith, *International Relations from the Global South*, 4.

to examine the construction of zombies, witches and vampires in order to discuss how cultural representations of monstrosity play a role in determining what qualifies as normal, civilized and human.

The topics were not only limited to ‘monsters’ but focused on a range of ‘beings’ constructed as being monstrous and/or wondrous such as unicorns and mermaids along zombies, vampires and witches.¹² The discussion focused on not the ‘reality’ of these beings but rather how ‘they were understood to be real’ and the socio-political contexts of their emergence and continued re-appearances. The course asks a series of questions to each monster such as what the specific construction means with respect to relationship between life and death, definitions of humanity, and systems of knowledge. The aim of the course is to problematize hierarchies between knowledge systems and how knowledge and what is considered real gets constructed. The questioning of what counts as knowledge and the process of how what is considered as knowledge is constructed means that the knowledges that we have hierarchized also can be destabilized. This is done in the second course which aims to widen our understanding of what counts as theory and theorizing.

The abstract of “Speculative Fiction and Theorizing” is as follows;

Science Fiction and Fantasy literature have explored political themes such as the decline of empires, revolutionary struggles and conceptions of individual liberty for a long time. The aim of the course is to explore how the way in which the themes and issues discussed can displace the landscapes of our imaginations and question the narrative forms in which we write and imagine international relations.

The aim of the course is to have students read speculative fiction as an instance of theorizing. The course focuses on reading and discussing books such as Victor LaVelle’s *The Ballad of Black Tom*, Octavia Butler’s *Kindred*, Ursula K. Le Guin’s *The Dispossessed* and *The Left Hand of Darkness*, China Mieville’s *Embassytown*, Sofia Samatar’s *Winged Histories*, Kim Stanley Robinson’s *The Years of Rice and Salt* and Samuel R. Delany’s *Babel-17*.¹³ These explorations demonstrate that theory and theorizing can be done in different manners and expanded the students’ archives of knowledge in order to think through certain issues such as empires, gender, the nature of language, the meanings of utopia, and climate change. These discussions guided the students to discuss issues such as language (*Embassytown*), utopia and dystopia (*The Dispossessed*), gender (*Left Hand of Darkness*) and race (*Kindred*) in a manner that did not limit them to the disciplinary confines of International Relations and prescribed notions of what counts as legitimate knowledge.

¹² A selection of readings from the syllabus are as follows; Stephen D. Arata, “The Occidental Tourist: ‘Dracula’ and the Anxiety of Reverse Colonization,” *Victorian Studies* 33:4 (1990): 621-645; Silvia Federici, *Caliban and the Witch* (Autonomedia, 2004); Raphael Hoermann, “Figures of Terror: The ‘Zombie’ and the Haitian Revolution,” *Atlantic Studies* 14:2 (2017): 152-173; Aleksander Pluskowski, “Narwhals or Unicorns? Exotic Animals as Material Culture in Medieval Europe,” *European Journal of Archaeology* 7:3 (2004): 291-313; Vaughn Scribner, “‘Such Monsters Do Exist in Nature’: Mermaids, Tritons, and the Science of Wonder in Eighteenth-century Europe,” *Itinerario* 41:3 (2017): 507-538.

¹³ Victor LaVelle, *The Ballad of Black Tom* (New York: Tor, 2018); Octavia E. Butler, *Kindred* (Beacon Press, 2003); Ursula Le Guin, *The Dispossessed* (New York: Harper, 1974); Le Guin, *The Left Hand of Darkness* (New York: Walker, 1969); China Mieville, *Embassytown* (New York: Ballantine, 2011); Sofia Samatar, *The Winged Histories* (Small Beer Press, 2016); Kim Stanley Robison, *The Years of Rice and Salt* (Harper Collins, 2002); Samuel R. Delany, *Babel-17* (Ace Books, 1966).

The two courses aim to start discussions on what counts as knowledge and what counts as theorizing and on topics such as the nature of language, gender, and humanity in a manner that is not limited through disciplinary boundaries. . As discussed, there are different ways to teach ‘critical’ perspectives. One of the choices is whether to teach the disciplinary knowledge and then introduce its criticism or to teach from outside the disciplinary knowledge. This essay provides two examples of an attempt to teach from outside of disciplinary boundaries to underline hierarchies of knowledge.

Essay by Priya Dixit, Virginia Tech

“I expected this class to be about real terrorism,” “She is pro-Muslim,” “We spend too much time talking about historical examples”—these are just some of the comments I have received in a decade of teaching upper-level undergraduate courses on Terrorism and Counterterrorism, National Security, and Global Security at a large US public university. Thinking about what to write regarding integrating critical perspectives into International Relations (IR) courses or, as I’ll discuss here, security and terrorism-related courses, it is difficult to outline a ‘this is what I do’ list. Much of how we teach and what we expect students and ourselves to learn is, of course, an individualized narrative; ‘what did you (singular) get from this class?’ asks a question in the student evaluations each semester. But, as we know, teaching, or, more precisely, learning, is a collaborative endeavor. Perhaps this is one central issue of integrating critical perspectives in my class: the view that learning is collective and shared and we produce knowledge when engaging with the readings and with each other.

One could argue, however, that this is not precisely a critical endeavor. After all, most other ways of analyzing IR and security studies would center ways of knowing: how do we know of/about security? But critical methods could mean being aware of the politics of knowledge production both at the level of constructing one’s syllabus as well as in the classroom space. By beginning each course with classes on how we do (and have done) research, what are some of the main ways of knowledge production regarding this topic, be it National Security or Terrorism and Counterterrorism or any other course, and what are some gaps and absences situates the issue we will be engaging with throughout the semester. This makes subsequent weeks on ‘issues and topics’ part of a broader discussion on knowledge production and communication. As I teach, I usually spend limited time discussing meanings of ‘critical,’ a somewhat fuzzy concept, and comparing with ‘Realism’ and ‘Liberalism,’ both of which have the inbuilt advantage of shaping perceptions and, thus, perceived legitimacy among undergraduates. After all, Realism should/does describe reality, one might say, while ‘critical’ approaches—‘critical’ being a big tent—can be difficult to describe. But by beginning the courses with an emphasis on knowledge-production, I find it possible to unsettle the categories by which security and terrorism studies usually proceed.

Even if I tend to use the term ‘critical’ rarely, it is useful to consider what ‘critical’ means when thinking through how to include critical perspective in security studies (and IR more broadly) courses. I think of critical as translation: translating how some of the more traditional concepts and theories are, themselves, products of particular sociocultural contexts; translating absences—why do we not include the state in much of the discussion on what constitutes ‘terrorism’?; and translating my own presence. I teach in predominantly white spaces and am racialized as an ‘other’ as soon as I enter the classroom for the first time. What does my own presence mean about how my students interpret what I say? How do I promote collaborative learning in a space where, initially, some students might be less inclined to see me as someone who is authorized to speak about terrorism and counterterrorism, especially if I am critical (in the everyday meaning of the word) of mainstream counterterrorism policies and practices? In the next few paragraphs, I would like to think through some of my experiences in teaching these undergraduate classes on terrorism and counterterrorism from a critical perspective.

Reviewing some of my older syllabi in preparation for writing this essay, unless a course is titled ‘critical’ (e.g. critical security studies), I tend to not use the term, but rather discuss security issues and topics in terms of gender, race, class, and place. This is partly a reflection of how the term ‘critical’ is interpreted in everyday language—my first graduate critical security course initially had a number of students interested in emergency management and homeland security as they had interpreted ‘critical’ as ‘urgent’—and partly a disinclination to spend time defending critical perspectives and, instead, just use them when discussing course topics.

On the whole, my syllabi take for granted that one teaches about terrorism and counterterrorism from a critical standpoint, with an ethos that prioritizes those who face threats. Our task is to examine insecurities from the ground up, as it were. There are four key aspects that I want to draw out regarding utilizing critical approaches to teach undergraduate courses on global security, especially terrorism and counterterrorism:

Knowledge Production and Reflexivity

Whether it is IR (broadly) or Global Security, National Security, and Terrorism/Counterterrorism, I start the course with an overview of different ways of doing research, discussing how we do research and how we produce knowledge. For studying terrorism, the disproportionate research focus on Jihadist terrorism as compared to other forms of terrorism¹⁴ and the imbalance in media representations of terrorist perpetrators, with Muslim attackers receiving disproportionately high media coverage as compared with other attackers,¹⁵ are both topics that encourage students to reflect upon how knowledge about terrorism is produced and communicated. I also include short exercises, such as one that asks student to review books on terrorism to note what is considered ‘terrorism’. This also shows how certain issues, such as gender and postcolonial approaches to terrorism, and topics, such as lynching and state terror, are often not part of these books’ contents. This exercise offers opportunities to discuss what counts as ‘terrorism’ (and what does not) and the implications of these absences for our knowledge of terrorism and counterterrorism. It also offers opportunities to discuss the hierarchical power dynamics of terrorism research in which the books and articles about terrorism that we read are produced by scholars in the Global North, even though terrorism in the Global North is relatively uncommon.

Standpoint Methodology

Methodologically, teaching critical approaches is often seen as difficult because such approaches encompass a wide range of ontologies and epistemologies. When teaching, a focus on recognizing the standpoints of the researcher/organization we are reading and of ourselves is one way to acknowledge the power differentials and hierarchies within which we learn and know. In other words, we bring different experiences in the classroom but, also, the texts we read and discuss are connected to specific historical, social, and political contexts. Towards the end of each semester, students and I workshop additional sources for each class topic, sources

¹⁴ Bart Schuurman, “Topics in Terrorism Research: Reviewing Trends and Gaps, 2007–2016,” *Critical Studies on Terrorism* 12:3 (2019): 463–480. DOI: [10.1080/17539153.2019.1579777](https://doi.org/10.1080/17539153.2019.1579777).

¹⁵ Erin M. Kearns, Allison E. Betus, and Anthony F. Lemieux, “Why Do Some Terrorist Attacks Receive More Media Attention Than Others?,” *Justice Quarterly* 36:6 (2019): 985-1022. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/07418825.2018.1524507>

that are from and of the regions we discuss. This, again, offers opportunities for students to engage in reflexive thinking regarding knowledge production but also recognize how our language and contexts shapes our own perceptions of threats and dangers.

Regarding standpoint, part of how I include critical approaches to teaching about terrorism and counterterrorism is by discussing my own experiences with learning about some of the issues we study in the courses. For example, I was not in the United States on 11 September 2001 (9/11) and did not know what had occurred until some days later. To my students, who are of the post-9/11 generation and know of terrorism mainly through this one major event, this information about my not knowing about it is a surprise. The question: ‘How did you not know?’ leads to broader discussions about insecurity, deaths (and whose deaths matter), and the type of violence we spend our time worrying about and spending money to counter (terrorism) and the type we do not (deaths due to preventable causes; deaths from mass shootings; etc.). Additionally, when discussing terrorism and counterterrorism, a focus on people who are affected by violence generates discussions about how some methods of killing are deemed more humane (e.g., drone strikes) as compared to others.¹⁶ ‘Humane for whom?’ is a question that then leads to considerations of perspective and whose lives and experiences we prioritize in the global system.

Reworking Power relations and Decentering Global North-centric Knowledge Production

Most of the concepts and theories that we are familiar with in terrorism studies are based upon experiences of the United States and the West more broadly. What might an international order or global security that prioritized experiences of the Global South look like? What if National Security courses also discussed the non-aligned movement, Indigenous sovereignty, and anti-colonial actions instead of (or when) learning about processes like deterrence and the security dilemma? What would drawing upon local knowledges and worldviews regarding violence and insecurity tell us regarding experiences of ‘terrorism’ and ‘counterterrorism’? Encouraging students to discuss these and related questions can lead to interrogations of the dominant framing in global security wherein the state is the main actor countering violence. Instead, critical approaches can indicate the complex nature and causes of violence and insecurity, drawing connections between contemporary insecurity and processes of colonialism and imperialism. While some of these questions and discussions serve to interrogate ongoing power relations, others—such as examining diaries and memoirs, analyzing primary sources regarding some key events- help illustrate how policies and practices that are seemingly commonsensical today were debated and challenged during their initial implementation. What is commonsensical now was itself contested and is the product of sociopolitical debates and dialogues and drawing on historical records and cases can help illustrate this.

What about State Terror(ism)?

¹⁶ Hugh Gusterson, “An American Suicide Bomber?,” *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, 20 January 2010, <https://thebulletin.org/2010/01/an-american-suicide-bomber/>. Gusterson considers drone strikes a mirror image of suicide attacks. This comparison opens up discussions of race, people who are affected, judgment regarding modes of killing, etc. in counterterrorism practices globally.

Critical approaches to terrorism also emphasize states' involvement in violence and how and when those are considered 'terrorism' and when they are not. Critical scholarship on terrorism does not just add the state as a perpetrator of terrorist violence but also critiques the state's violent practices, including its ability to constitute terrorist subjects in official statements, terrorism-related legislation, and subsequent counterterrorism practices. Through discussions of how the state is often written out of definitions of terrorism, a conversation about what this means is possible. In other words, what does excluding the state in understandings of terrorism lead to? How have global histories of violence shaped what is deemed legitimate violence (e.g. that of the state, that counters terrorism) and illegitimate violence (e.g. that used by non-state actors, often against the state)? One outcome is the constitution of non-state violence as 'terrorist' while excluding similar (or worse) violent actions by the state from the definition and related understandings of terrorism. A consideration of the state as terrorist make it possible to reflect upon state violence and on moral judgements inherent in the usage of 'terrorism.'

Conclusion: On Reflexivity and Speaking with Allies

Some of the ways in which I have integrated critical perspectives into undergraduate courses on terrorism and counterterrorism and, broadly, on security studies are outlined here. My approach has been to teach a course such that imperial histories and their impacts, the outcomes of silences and absences of certain topics and issues, and the gendered and raced meanings of relevant concepts are central to how we learn and know about it. This is not always easy or successful, especially when one is one of the few visible minorities in the classroom. This latter aspect is especially relevant in contemplating how to bring in critical approaches to the study of terrorism and counterterrorism in a classroom where there might be resistance to the use of the term 'critical' (or even just disinterest). For myself, I have found that speaking of issues such as state terrorism by Global North states, torture in the post-9/11 era, race and how it structures global politics can be done in alliance with others, including authors, filmmakers, policymakers and government officials who have theorized and discussed these issues. I have found this drawing on others, speaking with allies, as it were, builds a more collaborative approach in the classroom and includes students in observing and identifying gaps and silences in our knowledge of terrorism and counterterrorism. In a way, however, this speaking alongside others is also a form of caution that is a marker of my own place in the US classroom context. I remain an immigrant academic working in a time and place where I have been taught (and learned) to remain relatively unnoticed. That being said, it is also a form of teaching students about collaborative knowledge production and the possibility of building, through discussion, arguments, and dialogues, our knowledge about terrorism and global security.

Incorporating critical approaches to International Relations (IR) is a foundational component of my pedagogy. These approaches were integrated in every course I taught at Florida International University as well as St. Lawrence University, which ranged from introductory courses such as Introduction to International Relations and Contemporary International Problems, to more advanced courses like International Security and Critical Security Studies. In these courses I introduced constructivism, securitization, ontological security, feminism, and postcolonialism as critical lenses that students could use to understand social phenomena in IR, particularly security. Security was the theme that united these courses, and these critical approaches provided the means to problematize a concept that most of my students took as naturally given. In this sense, they questioned whether security was a concept¹⁷ or a “thick signifier.”¹⁸ They also analyzed who, or what, was being secured as well as for and by whom.¹⁹ Finally, they learned about the power dynamics of who gets to “speak” security and who is silenced, ignored, or repressed from speaking.²⁰

Admittedly, this is incredibly difficult, and my approach evolved over the years as I learned more effective ways to do this through trial and error. The pedagogy workshops at International Studies Associate Northeast (ISA NE) conferences were particularly helpful in this regard as were discussions with colleagues who taught similar material. Furthermore, my transition to the US Army War College, a Profession Military Education (PME) institution, has presented an entirely different set of challenges which I am slowly navigating as I seek to incorporate critical approaches more effectively in seminar discussions. I discuss below how I introduced critical approaches to my undergraduate courses at Florida International University and St. Lawrence University.

Setting the Stage

There are two key tools that I use to set the stage for introducing critical approaches to IR in these courses, both of which occur within the first two weeks of the semester. The first is a discussion on ontology and epistemology. Although entire semesters can be dedicated to each of those concepts alone, and the fact that they can be especially intimidating to undergraduate students, I use the chart below (Fig. 1) to begin class discussion on reality, how this affects our approaches to studying social phenomena (in this case security), and how knowledge is generated. This discussion serves two purposes: (1) it allows students to begin thinking about what makes critical approaches different from the “traditional” or “canonical” approaches, such as realism, liberalism, and their variants; (2) it also helps them understand the position from which many critical approaches begin and therefore have a clearer understanding of key contributions they bring to the study of IR. Of particular importance for me is that students understand the relationship between power and

¹⁷ David A. Baldwin, “The Concept of Security,” *Review of International Studies* 23(1) (1997): 5-26

¹⁸ Jef Huysmans, “Security! What do you Mean? From Concept to Thick Signifier,” *European Journal of International Relations* 4:2 (1998): 539-561

¹⁹ Thierry Balzacq, “The Three Faces of Securitization: Political Agency, Audience and Context,” *European Journal of International Relations* 11:2 (2005): 171-201.

²⁰ See: Lene Hansen, “The Little Mermaid’s Silent Security Dilemma and the Absence of Gender in the Copenhagen School,” *Millennium – Journal of International Studies* 29:2 (2000): 285-306; Marysia Zalewski, *Feminism after Postmodernism? Theorising through Practice* (London: Routledge, 2000).

knowledge as well as the idea of social construction. This discussion is not a one-off; as we go through the semester, we re/examine where the various critical approaches are situated ontologically and epistemologically.

Puzzle	Is there a “real” world “out there” that is independent of our knowledge of it?	
Ontology: Nature or essence of being: what is reality?	Foundationalism: A real world exists individually of human experience, knowledge, and thought	Anti-Foundationalism: the real world does not occur independently of our knowledge, it is socially constructed
Epistemology: Study of knowledge: how do we know what we know?	Positivism: emerges from the empiricist tradition (knowledge derived from observation) of natural science Relationships between social phenomena can be formed using theory to generate hypotheses which can be tested by direct observation	Interpretivism: disputes objective or value-free observation which is largely influenced by the personal perceptions and social constructions of the world Impossible to use pure observation to study social phenomena because they are dependent on personal interpretation

Fig. 1

The second, and most important tool for introducing students to critical approaches is teaching them how to conduct discourse analysis.²¹ This is at the heart of my courses since it becomes the tool through which they will learn to answer the questions posed in the introductory paragraph. The idea here is that discourse analysis equips them with the means to do close readings, understand how language can be mobilized to appeal to certain audiences, and to identify what is privileged and what is omitted to name a few. Teaching discourse analysis is a gradual, semester-long process and is integrated in every assignment they take part in, from class exercises to response papers. In essence, learning discourse analysis allows students to learn critical approaches ‘by doing.’ As the semester progresses, the students become more adept at applying it, which allows them to identify patterns in security discourses more effectively. Student feedback on this component of the course has been very positive since they feel that it is well integrated with course content and helps them understand the

²¹ Lene Hansen, *Security as Practice: Discourse Analysis and the Bosnian War* (London: Routledge, 2006).

material. Furthermore, they also see it as a skill they can utilize in other courses as well as their personal lives (for example, interpreting the daily news).

Learning by Doing

My courses are structured around three types of weekly assignments that reinforce ‘learning by doing.’ I learned this method from one of the ISA NE pedagogy workshops, and I think it personally helped me improve my courses. This method is helpful in any setting, but I found it especially effective for introducing critical approaches which can often appear less intuitive for students. The first set of assignments is a pre-class asynchronous reading of the material which includes the critical approach (for example, constructivism, securitization, ontological security, feminism, and postcolonialism), a case study illustrating its application, if one was not included in the first reading, and finally, notes on discourse analysis and how it has been applied to study security from this perspective. All three components are important since they help the student move from the theoretical to the practical, something that improves familiarity with the approach and facilitates the retention of information.

The second involves synchronous class centered on a daily exercise that focuses on the application of core concepts. This means that we only dedicate a short amount of time at the beginning of class to discuss any questions about the readings and leave the bulk of the time to focus on the class exercise. For example, if feminism is the topic, the exercise will focus on the interaction between gender and security. These exercises can be done two ways. Traditionally I would preselect a case, usually in the form of a news article, a political cartoon, or a short video clip, and the students would break off into groups to analyze the gender dynamics of the case, and how they can link these to security, through the use of discourse analysis. In recent years, however, rather than selecting a case myself, I have opted let each group select a case on their own by jointly searching for news articles, images, or video clips and deciding among themselves which to focus on. At the end of the exercise the groups take turns presenting their work, and this becomes the basis for further class discussion. I have found both to be effective, but the latter is more difficult to do in introductory courses. Regardless of which approach is preferable, what is important is that students learn how language is mobilized to frame security issues as well as the effects that this can have on the general public’s understanding of security and policy preferences for addressing it.

It is important to note that while the course dedicates a week to the introduction of each critical approach, students are tasked with incorporating previous approaches in these exercises as the semester progresses. This allows the course to avoid the pitfall of tokenism in which feminist or postcolonial perspectives are only covered once and never be revisited again. For example, if the previous week discussed gender and security and the current week focuses on postcolonialism, students could be tasked with analyzing gender as well as racialized discourses in a case study and the way they are linked to security. Taking this approach also helps students understand intersectionality and positionality, which are important concepts in various critical approaches. To be clear, the examples I have provided here are narrow; after all, feminism and postcolonialism are diverse intellectual traditions that analyze more than just gender or race. The idea is that each exercise can be modified to incorporate various concepts and build off each other throughout the semester.

The third and last component is a post-class asynchronous journal assignment. Here the students reflect on the critical approach that was discussed during the week. The idea is to be able to identify key aspects of the theory and how it resonated with them, how each approach relates (or not) to another as the semester unfolds,

and how it allows them to view social phenomena like security from a different perspective. Students are encouraged to think reflexively for this journal entry and consider the implications of what they have learned.

Beyond these weekly assignments, my courses replace midterm and final exams with response papers in which students utilize discourse analysis to apply these critical approaches to a current event they want to explore. For example, one of my more common response paper formats asks them to select a current event and then find various sources and media that cover their selected event. News articles, images embedded in these articles or otherwise, and video clips are all permitted. From here students are tasked with deconstructing these sources and locate security discourses, explicit or implicit, in the coverage of the event using several of the approaches discussed. In practice they are addressing the questions posed in the introductory paragraph above by putting to practice what they have learned throughout the semester. This again reinforces the idea of learning by doing.

Lessons and Conclusion

As I mentioned in the beginning, my approach to introducing critical approaches has evolved over time and I expect that it will continue to do so given my role as a faculty member at a PME. In the process of doing this in the past couple of years I have learned a number of lessons, some of which I have been able to put to practice more effectively, and some of which I am still trying to work on. In the former category there are two invaluable lessons. The first and most important is that much of the writing in critical approaches tends to be less accessible, especially for students in introductory courses. Beyond trying to find accessible readings for students, I found it useful to include case studies in which these approaches are employed so that the students can see how they can be applied. This is very important to helping them see the linkage between theory and practice. Furthermore, providing notes, especially on methods, can help students navigate how scholars approach particular case studies using critical approaches. The second lesson is that less is more. The pressure to follow a book outline (especially if students have to purchase that book) creates tendencies to throw the kitchen sink at a syllabus. I've found that especially when dealing with critical approaches, slowing down the pace of the class by including less content helps students focus on the important parts that lead to the stated learning outcomes. In recent years I have resorted to not assigning textbooks, and if I do, they tend to be open source (E-IR is particularly helpful here). I generally rely on journal articles or individual book chapters.

Regarding the latter category I continue to face two enduring challenges. The first is that it is often difficult to convey the complexity of the various critical approaches in a way that is tangible to students. As mentioned in my examples above, feminism and postcolonialism are diverse intellectual traditions, often with significant internal debates. Because the structure of my courses tends to narrow the focus of these approaches as a way to help students apply the theory to practice, I find it difficult to convey the intellectual diversity within these approaches beyond providing background information which they may not necessarily retain. The second involves my efforts to expand the course beyond discursive analysis to include other methods such as ethnography, practice, materiality, etc.²² I have found some success in doing this in more specialized courses like Critical Security Studies, although even here there are significant challenges due to practical and time constraints. Even so, I have yet to find a way to incorporate even a second method in introductory courses.

²² Mark B. Salter and Can E. Mutlu, *Research Methods in Critical Security Studies: An Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 2013).

My research is located at the intersection of IR and Critical Security Studies (CSS), and I am in particular interested in exploring with my students the interaction of security and identity narratives, the interplay of discourse and practice, and the role of the everyday in shaping dominant perceptions of foreign policy and world politics. One element of my research that has proved a particularly valuable teaching resource in this context is the Pentagon-Hollywood liaison and the production of the national security cinema in the United States.²³ Using this work as a jumping-off point, I designed and introduced new course topics exploring the intersection of popular culture, critical geopolitics and national security at Warwick University as part for the curriculum for the undergraduate modules Critical Security Studies, and US Foreign Policy, as well as the postgraduate module on US National Security. These segments have proved very popular with students and also inspired some excellent postgraduate and undergraduate dissertations on these subjects.

In addition to these more focused study units, I also frequently use pop-cultural devices (films, comic books, novels, video games, etc.) as additional resource for input in my lectures and seminars, from the popular HBO talk show *Realtime with Bill Maher* presenting a comedic take on the extremes of partisan polarization in the United States under President Donald Trump, to discussing the depiction of cyberwar and US-Chinese strategic rivalry in the novels *Ghost Fleet* and *2034*. Such pop cultural devices can facilitate student engagement with concepts and issues they might otherwise find quite abstract or removed from their own experiences, and help demonstrate the variety, relevance and everyday presence of concepts like security and identity beyond textbooks and academic readings. My specific aim thereby is for students to explore how common-sense understandings of security and geopolitics are promoted through cultural artefacts like Hollywood movies, TV shows, and comic books, and how we can explore critical constructivist concepts, such as discourse, narrative and power/knowledge via popular culture.²⁴ Below, I will illustrate my approach through the example of the Pentagon-Hollywood liaison.

Producing the National Security Cinema

Since World War II, Hollywood has been closely linked to the national security state, reflecting and co-constituting America's global superpower status in the popular imagination. Through the production of film, the "nation's preeminent form of cultural expression,"²⁵ discourses of national security and world politics are projected and promoted to domestic and global audiences for entertainment and PR purposes, sustaining and reflecting in turn hegemonic strategic narratives employed by the US government and the defense establishment. This intertextuality between politics and popular culture legitimizes geopolitical discourses as common-sense knowledge and generally accepted truth: from President Ronald Reagan referencing *Star Wars*

²³ Georg Löfflmann, "Hollywood, the Pentagon and the Cinematic Production of National Security," *Critical Studies on Security* 1:3 (2013): 280-294.

²⁴ Michel Foucault, *Power/knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977* (London: Vintage, 1980).

²⁵ Steven Mintz and Randy W. Roberts, eds., *Hollywood's America: United States History Through Its Films*, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia: Brandywine Press, 1993), 27.

in casting the Soviet Union as ‘Evil Empire’ to George W. Bush staging a *Top Gun* moment aboard a US aircraft carrier to announce “Mission accomplished” in Iraq.²⁶

Common to what Jean-Michel Valantin has dubbed the “national security cinema” is the perception of threat as an existential danger to survival, security and order against which American power has to be mobilized.²⁷ In showing movie posters, trailers, and short scenes from individual films, I explore with my students filmic representations of US national security and American foreign policy, from the Vietnam War (*Deer Hunter* 1978, *Apocalypse Now* 1979, *Platoon* 1986), and the Second Cold War (*Firefox* 1982, *Red Dawn* 1984, *Top Gun* 1986) to America’s War on Terror (*Black Hawk Down* 2001, *The Hurt Locker* 2008, *Act of Valor* 2012). As Valantin has noted, the “history of relationships between the American state and strategy is also that of communication between Washington and Hollywood, which constantly transforms the application of American strategic practices into cinematic accounts”.²⁸ The Internet Movie Database (IMDB) and other online sources are useful to identify those films that also have obtained official assistance for their production by the United States Department of Defense (DoD) and the Armed Forces, qualifying them as key entries in the “national security cinema” not only ideationally and in terms of representation, but also in a practical sense of cinematic production.

The cooperation between the Pentagon and Hollywood has been institutionalized through the Office of Public Relations and the Special Assistant for Entertainment Media of the Department of Defense (DoD), a position held for almost thirty years (1989-2018) by former US Navy Captain Philip Strub. Individual liaison offices for the US Navy, the US Army, the US Marine Corps and the US Air Force are located in Los Angeles. Since there is no centralized and readily available public record offered by the DoD on its entertainment liaison activities, identifying the involvement of the Pentagon with individual film productions can prove difficult. However, film productions are usually required to acknowledge DoD support in a film’s end credits and through IMDB these acknowledgments can be checked. A simple IMDB search for Strub, for example, reveals official thanks given to this Pentagon official in the end credits of more than fifty film and TV productions. What makes the official involvement of the Pentagon particularly relevant for a critical analysis of the political performance of the national security cinema is the nature of the cooperation between Washington and Hollywood.

Officially, the criteria the US Armed Forces and the Department of Defense apply to determine if they can provide official support for a film are “accuracy” and “realism”. The portrayal on film is supposed to reflect a realistic image of the American military and its role in defense of US national security. If approved, the practical support provided to film productions can include technical advice by active or former members of the Armed Forces, the lending of military hardware, such as tanks or helicopters, the provision of off-duty military personnel as extras, or film shoots on location at US military installations. This service can save a

²⁶ Catherine Lucey, ‘Bush was haunted by his own ‘Mission Accomplished’’, *The Boston Globe*, 14 April 2018. Available at: <https://www.bostonglobe.com/news/nation/2018/04/14/bush-was-haunted-his-own-mission-accomplished/E73SdlkXxBfUGsbyXv7ISI/story.html>

²⁷ Jean-Michel Valantin, *Hollywood, the Pentagon and Washington: The Movies and National Security from World War II to the Present Day* (London: Anthem Press, 2005).

²⁸ Valantin *Hollywood, the Pentagon and Washington*, xi.

production substantial costs, but also allows the Pentagon considerable leverage in maintaining a positive image of the American armed forces in the films it cooperates with.²⁹

This relationship has been described by insiders in the film business as “mutual exploitation.”³⁰ Hollywood obtains access to military hardware it would otherwise have to rent on the free market for substantially higher prices. The Pentagon in return reaps the public relations benefits from starring its technology and soldiers in big blockbusters where America’s military heroes get to save the world.³¹ However, the role of the Pentagon goes beyond a mere supplier of technology and passive free rider on Hollywood’s PR machinery. It actively takes control of the popular image of national security that is being created in the films it cooperates with. In many past instances, the Pentagon has requested script changes to make a movie more ‘accurate,’ which ultimately was a demand to show the military in a more favorable light.

Ultimately, “accuracy” and “realism” represent flexible categories of discursive production. In granting or denying support for a film, and being able to demand script changes, the Department of Defense can apply its own political definition of what constitutes a realistic portrayal of national security and translate this political imagination into the realm of popular culture. Every American soldier, fighter jet, or warship provided by the US government to appear on the big screen also represents an attempt to legitimize a particular vision of US national security and American geopolitical identity as real and authentic through the discursive authority of the Pentagon. The Pentagon-Hollywood liaison can thus be characterized as what Michel Foucault referred to as a “regime of truth”: knowledge and power intersect in establishing particular discourses as legitimate and generally accepted version of social reality.³² In studying these films critically, students are encouraged to deconstruct the particular meaning that is being created, which representations of identity and practices of security are being popularized this way, and the omissions that occur when the Pentagon deems a film not realistic enough.

Putting Theory into Practice

In the classroom, I will usually introduce students to three types of movies: (1) films that have been made with official cooperation with the Pentagon, (2) films that were denied official assistance, and (3) films that seem to counteract or challenge dominant narratives of American exceptionalism and military heroism. In the *Transformers* movie franchise, for example, the United States faces the threat of shape-shifting alien robots, the Decepticons, who want to exploit earth for its energy resources and technology to rule the universe. In its desperate fight against the evil alien invader, America is aided by a group of benevolent robot aliens, the Autobots. The second instalment of the series, the 2009 *Transformers: Revenge of the Fallen* is noteworthy for the unprecedented support the US Department of Defense offered director Michel Bay in terms of military equipment and personnel. In the final confrontation between humans, Autobots, and Decepticons in Egypt, shot on location on the US Army’s missile range in New Mexico, a US Air Force B-1 bomber, AWACs surveillance plane, and six F-16 fighter jets, the US Army’s Golden Knights parachute team, armored

²⁹ David L. Robb, *Operation Hollywood: How the Pentagon Shapes and Censors the Movies* (London: Prometheus Books, 2004).

³⁰ Sebastian Kaempf, “‘A Relationship of Mutual Exploitation’: the Evolving Ties between the Pentagon, Hollywood, and the Commercial Gaming Sector,” *Social Identities* 25:4 (2018): 542–558.

³¹ Lawrence H. Suid, *Guts and Glory: The Making of the Military Image in Film*. Revised and expanded edition. (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2002).

³² Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (London: Penguin Books, 1977).

Humvees, M1 Abrams tanks, M2 Bradley infantry fighting vehicles, and MLRS missile-launchers, a group of real-life United States Marines, and off the coast, the US Navy aircraft carrier USS John C. Stennis join the fight on the American side. The US military deploys the entire range of its impressive firepower, representing all branches of the Armed Forces to win a decisive victory in the deserts of the Middle East. If, according to the Pentagon, “full-spectrum dominance means the ability of US forces, operating alone or with allies, to defeat any adversary and control any situation across the range of military operations”, then *Transformers: Revenge of the Fallen* is full-spectrum dominance in action.³³

The Academy Award winning *Hurt Locker* (2009) in contrast, although even hailed by then Secretary of Defense Robert Gates as “authentic” and “very compelling” did not enjoy official institutional assistance. One film centers on a traumatized, renegade bomb disposal specialist in Iraq, who becomes addicted to the adrenalin rush of war and struggles to reintegrate into civilian life, the other is based on a 1980s children’s cartoon. After playing two short scenes from both films, I ask students to identify what they believe constituted a realistic and authentic image of the military in these movies from the perspective of the Pentagon, and what we can infer from these cinematic narratives about the construction of national identity and security in the US context.

Identity is maybe the most comprehensively studied issue in the critical analysis of film and the popular construction of an American “security imaginary.”³⁴ Key ideational themes of rugged individualism, American exceptionalism and military heroism delineate the American Self from the threatening, un-American Other. The construction of identity and the particular definition of the roles of Us vs. Them should therefore inform the critical analysis of the national security cinema in the classroom. Such a representational analysis of identity constructs reveals how the American superhero, heroic US soldier, or valiant secret intelligence operative, who defends the United States against existential threats through necessary force, is a persistent theme in the popular imagination.

This includes outlets like the *Mission Impossible* spy films (1996, 2000, 2006, 2011, 2015, 2018), the *G.I. Joe* military science-fiction franchise (2009, 2013), or major superhero blockbusters, such *The Dark Knight* trilogy (2005, 2008, 2012), and of course the multiple entries in the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU)—featuring iconic characters like Iron Man, Captain America, Black Panther, and the Avengers team of superheroes—constituting maybe the single most important global pop-cultural phenomenon of the last twenty years. The *New York Times* film critics A. O. Scott and Manohla Dargis have commented how cinematic portrayals of American superheroes, which have dominated commercially since the release of *X-Men* in 2000, were supporting the belief that the United States was “different from all others because of its mission to make ‘the world safe for democracy’.”³⁵

As they noted, both President Woodrow Wilson and the fictional character Iron Man have used this key trope of American self-identification as moral crusader for a just cause. Captain America quite literally embodies the military heroism of the United States, as he is clad in a costume version of the Stars and Stripes. As Jason

³³ Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Joint Vision 2020* (Washington DC: US Department of Defense, 2000), p. 61.

³⁴ Dan O’Meara, Alex Macleod, Frédéric Gagnon, and David Grondin, *Movies, Myth and the National Security State* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 2016).

³⁵ A. O. Scott, and Manohla Dargis, “Super-Dreams of an Alternate World Order,” *New York Times*, 27 June 2012, http://www.nytimes.com/2012/07/01/movies/the-amazing-spider-man-and-the-modern-comic-book-movie.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0.

Dittmer has elaborated in his work on the comic book, significant to Captain America's role in the process of popularizing geopolitical narratives is his ability to connect the individual experience of the hero to "political projects of American nationalism, international order, and foreign policy."³⁶ The Captain fights for America, but he also is America.

However, the popularity, continuity and commercial success of the identity construct of American exceptionalism and the soldier/hero as defender of freedom and democracy should not let students view Hollywood as a monolithic resource exclusively devoted to the propagation of an ideological project. Through exploring cinematic counter-narratives to the theme of American heroism and innocence, I aim to illustrate how identity constructs are in fact never completely fixed or stable, but always open to counter-hegemonic challenges. In the commercially highly successful *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* (2014), for example, Captain America doubts his role in the national security apparatus and is ultimately forced to fight his own side, the S.H.I.E.L.D. (Strategic Homeland Intervention, Enforcement and Logistics Division) intelligence agency, which has been subverted from within. The surveillance and intelligence apparatus conceived to counter terrorists appears as direct threat to the American ideals of freedom and liberty Captain America is supposed to embody. As Captain America/Steve Rogers (Chris Evans) explains, when confronted by S.H.I.E.L.D.'s plans to establish a global weaponized surveillance satellite network: "You hold a gun to everyone on Earth and call it protection. This is not freedom. This is fear." Through *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* students confront a critical reflection of the War on Terror's surveillance activities and covert counter-terrorism policies, delivered through the representational framework of a superhero movie.

Finally, in the cinematic discourse of national security, particular representations and patterns of production coincide with substantial levels of capital investment and revenue, suggesting their popularity and common-sense appeal. Exploring with students this circular flow of box office success, generic film production and capital investment not only offers a valuable resource in introducing key critical concepts in the study of IR—such as power/knowledge, discourse, and identity—but it also widens the scope of analysis beyond a purely representational perspective to include aspects of cultural economics in the evaluation of world politics.

³⁶ Jason Dittmer, "Captain America's Empire: Reflections on Identity, Popular Culture, and Post-9/11 Geopolitics," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 95:3 (2005): 626–643, here, 627.