

De-Canonizing Theory
Lida Maxwell

I began this year with the aim of interrogating the traditional notion of how one teaches political theory – namely, as communicating a canon of texts. This traditional conception of teaching political theory has its basis in the origins of the subfield, in the 1960's and 1970's. Thinkers like Sheldon Wolin, dubbing themselves political theorists, challenged the dominance of positivism in political science (and its facts/values distinction) on behalf of an interpretive approach to politics that helps us to *understand* our political concepts and make normative judgments about them and our political world – judgments that cannot be resolved for us by simply knowing how politics “works” or “functions.” However, even as they challenged the positivist's claim to legitimacy by showing the facts/values distinction to be illusory, they made their own claim to legitimacy by grounding their analysis in a historical body of texts that, simply by virtue of their greatness and “timelessness,” seemed to lend legitimacy to political theory as a whole. While political theorists have continually challenged the boundaries of “the canon” (seeking to expand it beyond “white dead men”), the idea of “the canon,” even expansively understood, remains a legitimating premise of doing, and hence teaching, political theory.

After teaching “Introduction to Political Theory” a few times – twice at Trinity, and once elsewhere – I became dissatisfied with teaching theory canonically, that is, with the goal of transmitting a canon. I found three primary problems with this mode of teaching theory. First and most obviously, canonically structured teaching is exclusive – focusing primarily on a set of texts written by western white men (Plato/Aristotle/Machiavelli/Hobbes/ etc. are the “core” of the canon, even if others are “added in”). Second, this form of teaching, in my experience, encourages a posture of deference in professor and students both – that is, the sense that doing political theory means to be deferent to the authority and wisdom of the figures of the canon, rather than experimenting with what thinking theoretically means. Finally, and relatedly, canonically structured teaching inevitably encourages students to shore up existing authorities rather than question and challenge them.

At first, I thought that I wanted to address these problems by diversifying my courses – specifically, by including non-western texts in the course. This is still a goal that I want to pursue, but I realized that simply adding texts into the course would not address the two other problems that haunt canonical teaching: the encouragement of deference (in doing theory and in life) and the discouragement of experimental thinking.

Consequently, I focused my thinking this year on how to *discourage* deference and to *encourage* experimental thinking. In so doing, my main guide has been Jacques Ranciere's *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* (trans. Kristin Ross. Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1991). The book is basically the recounting of how a French professor (Joseph Jacotot) is forced to go into exile in the Netherlands in the early 19th century. There, he is assigned to teach a class in Flemish. Jacotot doesn't speak or read Flemish, so he gives the students a bilingual version of a book – *Telemaque* – and tells them to use the book to learn French. And to Jacotot's surprise, they *do* learn French.

From this chance experience, Jacotot realizes an important truth: that anyone can learn anything. And from this truth, Jacotot realizes another one: that the way we usually

teach – where we think that our role is to explicate or explain material to students – is actually stultifying because it leads them to think that they need us in order to learn. Explication encourages stultification, in other words, because it leads students to see themselves as incapable of learning on their own

In contrast, Jacotot calls his newfound method of teaching *emancipation*. In this method, the teacher does not explain things to student; rather, the teacher is ignorant and makes the student explain things to him. Through such a practice, of essentially forcing the student to learn for themselves, the student is emancipated – they realize that they can learn anything on their own. [Just to be clear, Ranciere is not talking about the Socratic method, because that method too depends on Socrates leading the pupil, through questions, to the right answer. He is essentially saying that the only way that students come to realize that they can learn anything on their own – that is, that everyone has the capacity to learn – is by being forced to be the teacher. In many ways, this is an obvious truth, since professors often really learn texts precisely through teaching them.]

It would be challenging to enact Ranciere’s method in my classroom – not least because I am not an ignorant schoolmaster. I know a great deal about the things I teach. However, I have tried to make my courses *more* emancipatory this past year so as to encourage students to become free learners, people who feel they can learn things on their own. I did this in a few ways that I list below:

I. Course Design

I tried to let go of my sense that I “have to” include certain texts on the “Introduction to Political Theory” syllabus (i.e. because they are canonical) and instead have tried to select texts that I believe will offer exciting and stimulating claims about political problems. For example, I decided not to teach Marx in my Intro course (because most students tend to read him, in my experience, as a historical artifact rather than offering live insights) and taught *The Grapes of Wrath* instead. (Incidentally, this was very successful.)

II. Letting Go In the Classroom

I also tried to further let go of control of the classroom, so as to encourage students to feel like co-owners and co-guiders of class discussion, rather than passive recipients of my knowledge. If the students don’t take from the text everything I took from it, and if they guide the discussion in a totally different way from how I thought it would go, and if they seem to stay on one basic point instead of hitting others, so be it.

III. New Assignments

I’ve also created some new assignments this year that I hope will create an atmosphere wherein students feel like equal agents in class. Below, I briefly describe three of them.

1) “Walking/talking” assignment. After reading *The Republic*, I had students come to class with a paragraph describing and defending their own view of justice (not Socrates’, not Plato’s, but *theirs*). Then, I put them in pairs and had them play Socrates to each other’s vision of justice. One would outline their vision of justice and the other would interrogate them, and then they would switch roles. Afterwards, I had them write a reflection paper on it. This assignment went really well this year. Students really enjoyed discussing their own views of justice with each other, and the assignment encouraged students to use the texts we were reading to make their *own* judgments about justice (and other political values and problems).

2) In a different class, “Political Freedom,” I asked students – after reading *The Federalist Papers* and some anti-federalist writings (the “Letters of Brutus”) – to come to class with a paragraph or two describing the kind of government they would have fought for in 1787. Then, I put them into “mini constitutional conventions” for one class period, where they had to come to an agreement about the constitution. Afterwards, they had to write a letter (like the *Federalist Papers* and “Letters of Brutus”) defending their proposed constitution. The point was less historical accuracy and more to encourage imagination about, rather than deference to, government.

3) In “Political Freedom,” I had students read part of Ranciere’s *Ignorant Schoolmaster*. Then, I put a text on the syllabus that I had (literally) never read, and I told them they would have to teach it to me. On the day we were discussing that text, I told them they would have to decide how they wanted to teach the text to me. I left the classroom. They called me back in about twenty minutes later and taught me the text – and it was marvelous.