

## **Bringing (Inter)National History into ‘Introduction to International Relations’**

### **Abstract**

Many introductory courses in International Relations dedicate some portion of the class to international history. Such class segments often focus on great power politics of the twentieth century and related academic debates. In this essay, I argue that these international history segments can better engage students by broadening the histories instructors present and by drawing on especially salient histories such as those of the country in which the course is being taught. To elaborate on how one might do this, I discuss how U.S.-based courses could productively examine the country’s rise to great-power status. I outline three reasons to bring this topic into U.S.-based introductory IR courses, and I draw on personal experience to provide a detailed description of the ways one can do so.

### **Introduction**

Every instructor’s Introduction to International Relations (IR) course differs somewhat from other versions of this same course. From the means of student assessment to the assigned readings, there are many ways in which the details of this course vary.<sup>1</sup> It is relatively common, however, for introductory IR courses to include a segment on international history. After early sessions that familiarise students with basic concepts and perspectives on IR, there are often multiple class sessions that use aspects of recent world history to demonstrate how IR scholars attempt to explain such events. Such segments—especially in the United States—frequently start with the origins of World War One and continue through the end of the Cold War. A recent study, for example, finds that World War One, World War Two, and the Cold War are among the ten ‘most common empirical topics’ listed in a sample of forty-eight introductory syllabi (Knight 2019: 219).<sup>2</sup>

I argue, however, that academics who teach Introduction to IR courses ought to tailor these international history segments based on the country in which they are teaching. While this could focus on various national histories in their global contexts, I focus here on what this might look like in the United States by outlining my approach to bringing the rise of the United States to great-power status into my own introductory IR classes. That is, if the typical starting point for discussions of international history in U.S.-based Introduction to IR classes is 1898 or 1914, we could productively start much earlier. I begin with an argument as to why instructors ought to incorporate national histories in this way, and I then outline three reasons to bring the rise of the United States into Introduction to IR. Based on my own teaching experience, I then provide a detailed description of the teaching resources, materials, and methods that one might use to do so. I also address two important concerns – that adding more course content focused on U.S. experiences might worsen existing biases and that the rise of the United States would be better situated in more advanced courses.

### **Engaging Students on Their Own Terms**

If we want our classrooms to foster student growth, we must engage with our students. That is, we must foster their active participation in the classroom rather than treating students as passive recipients of knowledge we dispense. While there remains debate over how to define and measure ‘student engagement,’ this idea that engagement is fundamental to learning arises in a variety of different approaches to pedagogy. Indeed, variants of this admonition are evident in Paulo Freire’s ambition to craft a liberatory pedagogy ‘*with, not for, the oppressed*’ (1970 [2018]: 48) and in more recent calls for instructors to act as a ‘guide on the side’ rather than a ‘sage on

the stage’ (Johnson, Johnson, and Smith 1991: 81), to give students ‘as much control over their own education as possible’ (Bain 2004: 35), and to provide ‘intellectual and emotional availability’ to our students (Schwartz 2019: 15).<sup>3</sup> This might involve instructor practices like sending a welcome email before the start of the semester, writing a syllabus with inclusive language, providing personalized feedback on assignments, and so on (Damron and Mott 2005, Glazier 2020). Moreover, as I focus on here, the course material itself can promote student engagement by connecting to their past experiences and present concerns (Ettinger 2020, 348-349). All else equal, it will be harder to engage students with readings, lectures, and discussions on topics entirely unfamiliar to students or of unclear relevance to their lives, especially if one happens to be teaching amid a pandemic or a similarly disruptive event that presents students with higher levels of stress than usual (Ba 2021).

In the interest of student engagement, I posit that it is reasonable to design course content on the assumption that those studying in a given country will have some inherent interest in that country. In some fields, this may not have substantial implications for course design, but in Political Science, the country in which we are teaching can serve as a sort of baseline for the students. Indeed, in many countries, Political Science has an entire subfield oriented around the politics of that country—this is not particular to the United States (Garand et al. 2009). In other subfields, however, there are various ways in which the host country might shape course content. Here I develop my argument by focusing on the subfield in which I have done the most teaching—International Relations.

What constitutes “International Relations” as a discipline or as a subfield of Political Science?

This is one of the key questions an instructor faces when teaching Introduction to IR, and for many instructors, three basic elements (in varying proportions) often serve to answer this question for students. First, there is IR as a set of conceptual debates focused on power relationships in world politics (Guzzini 2001). Is the world a realm of anarchy or hierarchy? What constitutes ‘power’ in world politics, and how do states pursue it? Second, there is IR as a lens through which to make sense of international history (Knight 2019). Why did World War One occur? World War Two? Why was there no World War Three? Is there any one theory that can provide the most convincing answers to such questions? Third, there is IR as ongoing international practices—as ‘current events’ or ‘contemporary issues,’ as one might label such a section on a syllabus (Dayal and Musgrave 2018). If the subject is constituted in part by a certain way of looking at international history, then ‘current events’ are simply the most recent historical events on which we can tentatively bring established debates and theories to bear. In tailoring course content to the context in which one is teaching, however, instructors of introductory IR classes can most readily connect to shared student interest in their host country in the second and third aspects of the course. Below I offer a detailed example of one way that instructors might do so in the United States—by bringing early U.S. history into a discipline that has largely focused on more recent history.

### **Bringing the Rise of the United States into Introduction to IR**

To the extent that introductory IR classes based in the United States offer an overview of international history, these sessions often focus on the twentieth century. More specifically, as Knight’s (2019) analysis suggests, these classes often draw on prominent disciplinary debates on World War One, World War Two, and the end of the Cold War. I am not proposing that

instructors do away with discussions of those important events and their attendant debates.

Rather, I am suggesting that instructors can productively explore a broader swath of international history in Introduction to IR, and they can start by drawing on histories most likely to engage their students. Here I draw on my own teaching experience to make the case that Introduction to IR classes can, for example, use the rise of the United States—or more specifically, the period between 1783 and 1898 that is often overlooked in IR—to enrich student experiences. I elaborate here on three reasons why this particular topic is well-suited for an introductory IR class.

First, this topic can serve to dispel widespread myths about U.S. history. U.S. engagements in the Spanish-American War or in World War One are sometimes used to denote the time when the United States took its first steps on to the world stage, and while those are surely important points in the history of U.S. foreign policy, students may infer that they can safely ignore the first century or so of U.S. history when their instructors do the same. Indeed, they may fill in the blanks with reductive but widespread narratives that separate U.S. foreign policy into “isolationist” and “internationalist” periods (Dunn 2005: 253). Rather, in framing early U.S. history in IR classes, instructors might draw on Restad’s (2012: 58) argument that the isolationist/internationalist dichotomy in framing U.S. foreign policy does not get the history right and ought to be replaced with a narrative that foregrounds ‘steady unilateral exceptionalism’.

Second, studying this period offers instructors the chance to bring historically marginalised groups and under-studied topics into IR. Such topics – especially Native dispossession and resistance (Wadsworth 2014; Szarejko 2020) and Black liberation struggles (Anievas,

Manchanda, and Shilliam 2015; Koomen 2019) – can help relate the field of IR to the current questions of race, identity, and social justice that students so often want to discuss (Bunte 2019; Towler, Crawford and Bennett 2019). In other words, a seemingly familiar history can be used to expose students to a broader range of actors than they might expect to encounter in an IR class and to challenge biases in the discipline (Cook 2019). A session on the rise of the United States, in short, can show students that IR can take marginalised peoples seriously as political actors, and it can promote reflection on the issues that political leaders and activists face in seeking to remedy that marginalisation (Marineau 2019).

Third, the rise of the United States can provide students with a helpful case with which to compare other rising powers. It is now common in Introduction to IR, for example, to spend some time on the ‘rise of China’ and its implications for world politics.<sup>4</sup> Unfortunately, it is often the case that students will not have studied the rise of any other country in depth to that point in the course. Perhaps earlier sessions will have made mention of the rise and decline of great powers, the tensions that such transitions can inspire, and the ways that rising and declining powers respond to those tensions (Goddard 2018; Parent and MacDonald 2018; Shiffrinson 2018). Even if students heard about such dynamics, however, it is unlikely that they explored the rise or decline of any given state in great depth. Examining the rise of the United States can allow for more sustained student engagement with the expansion of one particular state—one that will be relatively familiar to most students at U.S.-based institutions—and this offers students an important comparison when they later encounter debates on Chinese government intentions and capabilities (Buzan and Cox 2013). The likely long-term importance of the U.S.-China relationship should give IR scholars all the more reason to teach their introductory

students about the rise of both states.

### **Principles to Practice**

Even if one is convinced of the merits of bringing the rise of the United States into Introduction to IR in U.S.-based institutions, this would be a new topic to teach for many IR scholars, which would present immediate practical questions. How should IR scholars teach this subject, especially given the lack of significant disciplinary debate on any particular event in this period? When I first taught this subject, I used a traditional lecture format that presented some brief opportunities for questions and discussion – I used more intensive active learning elements such as games, simulations, and small-group discussions during other sessions. But to offer a more detailed explanation of how one might approach this subject, I will describe the four main topics I covered in a session on the rise of the United States during a summer 2019 Introduction to IR course.<sup>5</sup> I offer the following description not as a model to be replicated but as one example that I hope will inspire further experimentation among IR instructors.

I wanted to start this session by reminding students that the United States – like any polity – was not created *ex nihilo*. In focusing in particular on the British influence on early U.S. institutions, I relied in large part on two readings. First, I used Sean Gailmard's (2017) article, 'Building a New Imperial state: The Strategic Foundations of Separation of Powers in America,' which uses a formal model to demonstrate that the separation of powers in the U.S. system was borne of a British dilemma. Given that the Crown needed governors to administer their overseas colonies, how was it to prevent excessive rent extraction by these governors? The Crown's solution, Gailmard argues, was to create colonial legislative assemblies that would control budgets and

taxation independent of the governor. The second reading on this topic, an excerpt (Chapter 1) from Julian Go's (2011) *Patterns of Empire: The British and American Empires, 1688 to the Present*, similarly makes the case that U.S. institutions and behaviours look much like their British predecessors and that the United States replicated its imperial patterns as it expanded even while adjusting for somewhat different opportunity structures. Go, however, approaches the subject from a background in sociology, which helps illustrate to students that different methodological approaches can nonetheless yield similar results. Moreover, Go's explicit comparison of British and U.S. practices helps to set up the question of whether the United States is indeed an empire – a question to which I will return.

The second topic I introduced was the question of why the United States deepened its union by abandoning the Articles of Confederation for the Constitution. Similar to the way that one might organize a discussion of the origins of World War One, I structured this segment around three perspectives in the literature, each associated with a different reading that I briefly described in class. First, Holton (2007) argues that the reasons were primarily economic in nature. Political elites saw trade as the key to future U.S. prosperity and therefore saw the individual states' lax use of their tax and debt collection powers as a threat to the creditworthiness of the federal government. Second, Parent (2011) makes an explicitly realist argument. Voluntary unification for him is an extreme alliance, and only an 'optimally intense, indefinite, symmetrically afflicting threat' would suffice to induce such a sacrifice of autonomy; political elites, however, still need to persuade relevant domestic audiences of unification's necessity (2011: 4). Third, Musgrave (n.d.) argues that it was neither economic nor security concerns that yielded unification. Rather, it was an institutional quirk of the Articles of Confederation. Because the

Articles required unanimity and because the political elites who had qualms with the Articles could not arrive at consensus on limited reforms, elites instead crafted an entirely new system. Addressing this topic is helpful in encouraging students to rethink the boundary between ‘domestic’ and ‘international’ – a distinction, one might remind their students, that is integral to many understandings of IR while often being rather blurry in practice (McConaughey, Musgrave, and Nexon 2018).

The third topic I introduced is one I have already noted above – the question of whether the United States is an empire. If feasible given the class size, this may be a useful place to pause for discussion either by breaking the students into small groups or by asking the class as a whole to contribute to a conversation about what ‘empire’ means. Such a discussion can helpfully get students asking the same questions that IR scholars ask when talking about empire. Is ‘empire’ an analytically useful concept, and if so, how can empire be distinguished from other forms of governance? As noted above, these are questions that a reading of Go (2011) should prompt for students, but when lecturing on this topic, I also relied on Nexon and Wright (2007) to describe different political orders and the ways that a polity might more or less closely approximate an empire. Indeed, such courses ought to directly address the American empire debate precisely because there is so much use of ‘empire’ language in popular discourse (Jackson and Nexon 2015) and in public-facing historical work (Nugent 2008; Immerwahr 2019). Discussions on this topic might ultimately distinguish between approaches that take a binary view (in assuming that polities are either imperial or not – typical of much popular conversation) and approaches that instead treat empire as a relational concept or ideal typical model that polities can approach to varying degrees (Doyle 1986; Nexon and Wright 2007; Harris 2017). I found it worthwhile to

have this discussion before we arrived at later great-power politics – before we arrived at the Cold War and the rise of China. Having first discussed in abstract terms what constitutes “imperial” political action, we were later able to have fruitful discussions about whether and to what extent modern state practices have been imperial.

Fourth and finally, I discussed the use of military force and occupations with a specific emphasis on America’s ‘Indian Wars’ and Reconstruction. Within IR, there is much work on the questions of when the use of military force is most effective, what makes occupations more or less likely to succeed, and when states should use force in such ways (e.g., Edelstein 2008 and Morkevičius 2018). There remains relatively little work in IR, however, that uses early U.S. history to address such topics, but this offers an opportunity. To the extent that there is work of this sort in IR, much of it is quite recent (e.g., Chacón and Jensen 2020, Pampinella 2021), and exposing students to the latest research can provide them with a vivid sense of where the field is going and what work they might be able to do if they want to conduct research. In my sessions on the rise of the United States, for example, I have used Stewart and Kitchens (2021) to discuss the political effects of military occupations and as well as Frymer (2017), Grynaviski (2018), and Maass (2020) to detail the process of U.S. territorial expansion.<sup>6</sup> Discussing topics such as these allowed me to again draw attention to the blurry line between ‘domestic’ and ‘international’ affairs, and these topics can lead to a provocative question for discussion – why is it that so much IR scholarship has ignored early U.S. history in the construction and testing of theory?

### **Caveats and Conclusions**

I conclude by offering responses to two potential concerns. First, one might be concerned that IR

already focuses on the United States to a great extent; perhaps we ought not to skew introductory courses even further in that direction (Maliniak et al. 2018). I would respond in two ways. First, as others have argued with reference to research in the field, the focus on the United States in IR scholarship is ‘not especially outsized when its large population, economy, and its extensive history of participation in interstate wars are taken into account’ (Hendrix and Vreede 2019: 319). I would make a similar assertion with respect to pedagogy in IR—frequent attention to the United States may not be ‘especially outsized,’ and bringing U.S. history more fully into U.S.-based classes especially may enhance student engagement while also informing an introductory class in the ways I have suggested above. There may even be civic value in bringing national histories into Introduction to IR given the limited exposure most students receive to (often hagiographic) histories of their home country prior to college (Westheimer and Kahne 2004; Szarejko and Carnes 2018). Second, I would reiterate that bringing national histories into the IR classroom can serve to diversify the sources and topics our students encounter. When engaging with international history, many IR classes focus on events or issues around which there are well-established lines of debate, but this can obscure the extent to which the composition and focus of IR as a field is diversifying and bringing a wider historical lens to bear on long-standing questions.

A second concern one might raise is that the topics I have advocated for teaching in Introduction to IR are better left for higher-level classes on U.S. foreign policy. I would agree that advanced undergraduate courses on U.S. foreign policy should indeed cover some of the topics I have discussed if they do not already do so. But my argument for bringing the rise of the United States—or similar national histories (Darwich et al. 2020)—into introductory classes rests on the

fact that not every student will continue to study IR or Political Science thereafter. Students with majors outside of Political Science may only take an introductory course to fulfil general education requirements, and students within the major might decide to switch majors or opt to take higher-level classes in a different subfield. Their varying experiences in the discipline will depend in part on ‘sparking curiosity’ at the introductory stage, and encounters with resonant histories may help in doing so (Ettinger 2020, 348). Moreover, not all departments have the resources to routinely offer advanced courses on U.S. foreign policy. Given these realities, I believe it is worth covering the rise of the United States in in U.S.-based Introduction to IR classes or similarly reorienting one’s engagement with international history depending on the context in which you are teaching.

In summary, I argue that there are good reasons to broaden the histories we bring into Introduction to IR classes and to focus on those histories that will be most salient and engaging to our students. In U.S.-based classes, instructors may thus incorporate the rise of the United States into Introduction to IR, and I have described some resources, materials, and methods on how to teach this topic. When students enter a classroom for Introduction to IR, many of them will be encountering the academic field of IR for the first time. For some, it will also be the last time they engage with the field. Regardless of any given student’s subsequent experiences, I believe that our students will be better off if we expose them to the histories that will best help them to understand the field itself as well as their own place in the history of world politics.

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> One such difference is the title of the course – by referring to 'Introduction to IR' here, I do not mean to dismiss similar courses that are instead labelled as introductions to, e.g., 'world politics' or 'international studies'.

<sup>2</sup> The Cold War is the most common empirical topic, whereas World War One takes third place, and World War Two ties with 'US Hegemony' for eighth place.

<sup>3</sup> The emphasis in the quotation from Freire is in the original text.

<sup>4</sup> The rise of China ranks fourth in Knight's (2019: 219) list of the most frequently taught 'empirical topics' in introductory IR courses.

<sup>5</sup> I also taught this topic in two asynchronous online summer courses in 2020. While the mode of delivery was different, the content was similar.

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<sup>6</sup> While the article by Stewart and Kitchens was not published until 2021, I drew on their insights starting in my 2019 class with reference to a publicly available version at the following address:

[https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract\\_id=3223825](https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3223825). With respect to Maass (2020), I discussed that book in my summer 2020 classes but not in 2019.