

The East-West Encounter: A Pedagogical Experience

Kalyani Unkule, Jindal Global University

Globalization has permeated the study of social sciences and been the subject of extensive interdisciplinary investigation. Much attention has been focused on the polemics surrounding its impact—desirable or otherwise. However, there are two developments which have received relatively less attention. Firstly, the study of globalization has had an impact on the very disciplines within which it has been conducted. For instance, it has denationalized history through the emergence of new streams like Global History. Secondly, this research has led us to the realization that globalization is not a phenomenon of recent vintage but in fact has been witnessed in various iterations in the past. This is an important conclusion; being attentive to recurring patterns holds clues to curing the current malaise surrounding the negative fallout of globalization. In the pages that follow, I have shared my experience teaching a course that foregrounded these two aspects, using the familiar rubrics of “East” and “West” as the point of departure.

Having the possibility of teaching an elective can be rare, and when one does have it, there is the challenge of convincing a committee of departmental colleagues that your idea is of adequate academic merit and sufficiently well developed. And while getting your peers’ support for your idea is often an uphill struggle, it can pale in comparison to getting students to sign up and sustaining their interest through the length of the course. Occasionally, it all comes together, and one comes as close as one ever will to a learning and teaching experience that leaves both student and teacher in some way altered and inspired.

I had been teaching compulsory courses in Political Theory, Political Economy, and International Relations to first year undergraduates, courses with content heavily tilted towards concepts and theories developed in the West. While I did my best to convey that the origins and evolution of these perspectives were closely linked to the history and social context of a specific part of the world, it soon became clear that this did not go far enough towards encouraging an interest in theory, let alone critical thinking. Outside the classroom, I was constantly confronted with deep-seated conviction in the intellectual superiority of the “Western” world, not uncommon on campuses across India.

This inspired me to dig deep into my somewhat eclectic social sciences training to find something that might at least momentarily free students' minds from this straitjacket of sorts: something that would invite students to question the element of received wisdom inherent within the same concepts I had insisted they master only a couple of terms ago, something that would force them out of the familiar paradigms attached to their experience growing up in a post-liberalization India, where globalization was not the "After" to a starkly different "Before," but the very backdrop of everyday life.¹⁶ It was at this juncture that I introduced an elective called *The East-West Encounter: Interdisciplinary Perspectives*.

The course aimed to explore how applying various disciplinary perspectives transforms popular notions about the West and the East—their alleged differences and shared history. However, more significantly, it sought to convey how the disciplines themselves have evolved through a consistent, critical interest in the question of the East/West divide. I had initially titled it *East/West Compared* but before long realized that the very problem was that the two had been particularized and seen in comparison, leading to pervasive notions of a consequent hierarchy. It was important to study their meeting points, their encounter as it were, to break this pattern. The key intended learning outcome was to develop critical analytical skills that challenge the dominance of Eurocentric perspectives in popular discourse and scholarship. In addition, students were expected to appreciate how different disciplinary traditions and approaches can be harnessed towards enlightening different aspects of a debate.

Focusing respectively on the works of Edward Said, and Buruma and Margalit, the introductory module was designed to introduce students to the concepts of Orientalism (Said, 1977) and Occidentalism. The intention here was to establish that the "West" was just as much a constructed idea as the "East," as a prelude to encouraging students to think about the purposes and implication of such construction. In preparation for the next module, "The Great Divergence Debate," the class briefly reviewed Braudel's *durée* approach to historical analysis. The *longue durée* approach seeks to de-emphasize the common tendency to study events in history

16 Students currently at undergraduate level in India belong to the generation born in the late 1990s, years after reforms aimed economic liberalization were introduced in the late 1980s and early 1990s. They will not therefore have any recollection of life in pre-reform India, characterized by a planned economy, elaborate state intervention and bureaucratic presence in business, a rather marginal private sector and very limited variety in the consumer goods market. For instance, my family's first car when I was growing up was the Ambassador, one of only two cars available in the market at the time—the other being the Fiat Premier Padmini.

and instead shifts the focus to the long run as a more useful way of understanding the nature and causes of change. This module addressed the question “at what juncture and for what reasons did the East fall behind?” in developmental terms. Competing understandings of “falling behind” and reasons for its occurrence were drawn out of economic and global history to challenge the conventional/textbook story of the Industrial Revolution being the primary cause. A review of the work of various scholars on the question revealed that the causes to which they attributed this divergence were closely linked to the moment in time they identified as its starting point.

Having discussed competing explanations, the next couple of weeks were dedicated to the theme of empire. The focus of our enquiry was the question: Did imperialism play a decisive role in bringing about the Great Divergence? In addition to examining both sides of the debate, this module also drew on the material previously studied by examining sociological and economic justifications for, and consequences of, empire. I rediscovered the work of Patrick O’Brien who had taught me at the London School of Economics and wished I had paid closer attention when he explained his thesis that the divergence was in fact a direct outcome of the positioning of Europe and the rest in the global trading system. O’Brien (2004) argues that the key difference between the colonial regions in Asia and Africa on the one hand and colonial settlements in the Americas on the other was that the former failed to diversify out of production of primary commodities dependent on local natural endowments, while the latter were able to attract skilled labor and capital investment from Europe. Had I understood the full import of this argument back then, I might have expressed my reservations about his implicit conclusion that “development” in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was unrelated to whether one was under democratic or imperialist rule.

The next two modules—“The History of European Integration” and “The Role of Religion in Politics”—were to serve as case studies to apply the concepts and perspectives thus far learnt. Europe was a deliberate choice aimed at urging students not to view it as the West but to understand that any region can have its own East/West, its own carefully crafted binaries and perpetuated hierarchies. Traced through the decades, the history of European integration casts Europe as landscape for both East and West to sidestep the simplistic associations we make with these categories. The literature prescribed was work describing the writing of history in Eastern Europe and the wider politics of commemoration on the continent to understand its implications for ensuring peace and assisting integration.

The class noted how the history of Western Europe has dominated what is considered “European history” and the histories of the rest have either been muted or amplified depending on the dictates of political expediency. Many students, whose only exposure to history are the (often) nationalist histories taught in school, found it both challenging and enlightening to appreciate the unbiased nature of history itself. Another startling message here was that global hierarchies sometimes reproduce themselves at regional, national, and local levels. The other case study on religion and politics posed the question: Is religion characteristic of political institutions and processes exclusively in the East? This common (mis)conception was addressed by examining the role of religion in US politics. The potential of religion to contribute towards peacebuilding was also considered as a way of rethinking the prevailing mainstream narrative.

The course culminated in a summative discussion on the politics of knowledge creation, almost coming back full circle to Said. Shiv Visvanathan’s work on human rights as a Western conception and on Eastern approaches to alternative science as a challenge to the mainstream discourse on growth and development was used as the basis for discussion. This final module was intended to encourage students to seek out counter-hegemonic discourses in the quest for disciplinary evolution and practical solutions.

In the concluding lines of this essay, I would like to share the impact of this course, both on students and myself as a teacher. A student who had taken the course recently sent me a thank you note close to graduation. In this note she described the class as one of the “pivotal moments of my life” and then went on to summarize the contents and lessons better than I could ever have, in the following words:

I have, since that year, revisited the course materials numerous times. It later struck me that, not only was the course full of what was (at least to me) exciting new ideas, but it was also structured in a way that really led the class to see and engage with the East-West binary from all angles—the course began by breaking down the East-West distinction and demonstrated how the binary was nothing beyond a political construct. Then the course went on to show how the political and geographical spaces that this binary operated in were not fixed. It then went on to call attention to the differential treatment that existed when “Western” and “Eastern” religions were spoken of in context of modernity in general and the modern State in particular. This then progressed to the discussion on Eastern and Western knowledge politics to finally

conclude by exploring the idea of the “East” in the “West” through how the children of first generation “Eastern” immigrants interacted with a “Western” society. In that, the course ended in almost the same place where it began, by reasserting the extent to which the “East” and the “West” were political constructs.

Elsewhere in the note she remarks;

Through the course, I was forced to confront and pay closer attention to the way in which I thought about the world.

Immensely encouraged by these dynamics in a global classroom somewhere in post-liberalization India, I have found myself looking for places to revisit these themes in courses I have subsequently designed and taught. For instance, in my elective called *The Idea of Europe*, I have devoted a section to the concept of “Eurocentrism.” Going a step further, I once asked students taking this course to reflect on the extent, if any, of Eurocentrism in their own law school curriculum. Once again, the ability of students to express themselves with clarity and poignancy was astounding. One student wrote:

Instances of Eurocentrism are rampant in the Global Law School. A student was asked in one class what word came to his mind when he thought of Europe and he said “Ideas” and went ahead to explain how philosophy and political science developed in Europe. A lesser human would have cringed (real knowledge is to know the extent of one’s ignorance—Confucius), but one should understand that this ignorance is symptomatic of an inherent flaw that exists in the curriculum that is being taught there. While they are being taught in great detail about Durkheim, Marx, Weber, and Bentham, a blind eye has been turned towards the philosophers and theorists of this continent be it Chanakya, Gargi, or Buddha (trivia: European philosophers are recognized by this word processor, while the latter ones are underlined in red). There are times when commonsense becomes the casualty of Eurocentrism, especially when seminars like Internal and External Dynamics in the Middle East Post-Arab Spring or The Middle East in Upheaval are conducted in a country where “Middle East” is actually West. This is the textbook example of Eurocentrism and it literally puts Europe in the center of the world, which leads to places being labeled as “Middle East,” “East,” or “Far East.” Should it be acceptable to sacrifice commonsense at the altar of convenience? Global education would in an ordinary sense

mean studying from a perspective of a person who is not bound by predispositions and biases, and being able to take into consideration different perspectives, all of this while understanding the greater values of justice and equity. In this academic era of deconstructionism and critical theory, Global Law School is teaching students how to think and then asks them to question everything; these students take this as it is given, therefore failing to learn the lesson. How can one be expected to reimagine a concept if that individual's imagination has been limited by the same system of linear thinking? This has led to creation of a cookie-cutter army of faux-highbrows who emulate intelligence and hence "global education" = "think like a white man."

This pedagogical experience has taught me, above all, that our attempts to understand and problematize globalization have only just begun. Conversations between the past and the so-called Millennials that have unfolded in my East-West class have left me inspired to seek similar encounters in future.