The unapologetic schoolmaster
Paul Kirby*

Department of International Relations, School of Global Studies, University of Sussex, Brighton, UK

In this short intervention, I offer three propositions on the relationship between ‘criticality’ and pedagogy in contemporary security studies. First, we should not set up the critical scholar as a new kind of masterful explicator. Second, we should nevertheless be militant about the inclusion of the critical within the university curriculum, and in particular resist the idea that ‘criticality’ is an afterthought or echo to the mainstream canon. Third, we must ensure that ‘the critical’ is about more than just the content of what we teach, but includes the politics of academia beyond the classroom. The argument is illustrated with provocations borrowed from Jacques Rancière.

Keywords: pedagogy; criticality; syllabi; higher education; university; teaching; Jacques Rancière

In The Ignorant Schoolmaster, Jacques Rancière identifies the figure of the old master as central to conventional ideas about education:

Selection, progression, incompletion: these are his principles... [W]e graduate to a higher level: other rudiments, another book, other exercises, another professor. At each stage the abyss of ignorance is dug again; the professor fills it in before digging another. Fragments add up, detached pieces of an explicator’s knowledge that put the student on a trail, following a master with whom he will never catch up. The book is never whole, the lesson is never finished. The master always keeps a piece of learning – that is to say, a piece of the student’s ignorance – up his sleeve. I understand that, says the satisfied student. You think so, corrects the master. In fact, there’s a difficulty here that I’ve been sparing you until now. (1991, 21)

This explicative order – the constant progression narrative of knowledge from a master – is what Rancière denounces as ‘an indefinitely reproduced mutilation’ (1991, 21). Instead he seeks a pedagogy of emancipation without expert teachers. The strictures of the contemporary academy are too great for such radicalism, and we may not desire it even if it were made possible, but some provocations remain. Consider three.

First, when it comes to the field of security and war, the figure of the master is liable to loom larger still, presumed as he is to hold the knowledge key for the highest of politics. Indeed, this affinity is much commented on. We may quickly be tempted to think that this bolsters the case for a critical pedagogy of security: one that replaces the phallic authority of the nuke with more subversive and more egalitarian concerns. But caution is in order, because the critical schoolmaster can fall just as easily into explication, seeking to bring students, by degrees, to her own level of criticality (cf. Rancière 1991, 3). This is not just because the abyss of ignorance will now be dug in relation to new epistemic

*Email: P.C.Kirby@sussex.ac.uk

© 2013 Paul Kirby
authorities. It is also because a repeated insistence on the ‘critical’, especially to the ears of the by-definition uninitiated (students are, after all, paying to be initiated, if not only for that), may just as easily re-inscribe marginality as overcome it (Shaw and Walker 2006).

In the classroom, which acts as a kind of imagined space where students will break the bonds of standard theory, we are tempted to fight the master discourse by repeatedly insisting on the contributions of the critical. As explicators of the critical, we want our students to resist and critique all kinds of arguments, except ours. There is, then, a familiar tension between criticality as an ethos and as a content. It is what Rancière would identify as the process by which explication becomes stultification. We cannot measure the criticality of our practice by how many students end up agreeing with us, who end up ‘critical’ like us, even if we can specify what that would mean (see Hynek and Chandler 2013). It may be objected that this conformity is not what anyone intends, but is it not the implication of finding the critical not in a procedure of thought per se, but in an acceptance of certain counter-arguments to the mainstream? Partisans of the critical, when resisting the figure of the schoolmaster, may then find themselves closer to Weber’s preference for the ‘uncomfortable fact’ in the classroom (Weber 2012, 347; Jackson and Kaufman 2007).

Second, and seemingly paradoxically, there is the place of the curriculum. If critical classroom practice might mean stepping away from the stereotype of the schoolmaster, course design may instead be more assertive, more unapologetic in its framing. Anecdotal evidence suggests that critical teaching in security, as in IR more broadly, usually proceeds via a standard method: students are exposed to the conventional theoretical edifice (realism, liberalism, sometimes constructivism, very occasionally Marxism), which is taught somewhat askew, before being introduced to a range of critical views that undermines the canon and opens up a wider critical vista (usually taken to mean critical theory, post-structuralism, feminism, post-colonialism, and then maybe a really marginal topic, like queer theory or autoethnography). The point, justifiably enough, is both to convey the mainstream and to unsettle it, setting out IR as discourse of power while providing the tools to deconstruct it.

But does this not unintentionally do ‘the critical’ a disservice? Take the post-colonial view of global politics (if we can assert the unity of such a thing briefly as understanding the international in terms of empires, their resistors and their aftermaths). Compared to the visions of system structure or complex inter-dependence, this story is not just more politically charged in some nebulous sense. It is also more true. Such counter-narratives are not in lack of epistemic warrant. The texts exist, so why not start with them? Teaching controversies, allowing for alternative interpretations of the evidence, pushing students to challenge the empire-centric account: all of this can remain without implicitly apologising for the critical by putting it after the usual story.

It would be strange for anyone to graduate from an IR programme not knowing what ‘Realism’ is. But understanding the state of the discipline isn’t the same thing as foregrounding its self-mythologies. We know the actual diversity and criticality of research interests is not well reflected in teaching (Foster et al. 2012). Perhaps this is a generational difference, perhaps one founded on the privilege of never being made to always progress through the ‘American Science’ in any given argument. Either way, we might stop thinking of teaching as the job of conveying the same sense of embattlement against a mainstream that frames critical IR’s story of itself. And, in the process, move from unapologetic to militant. To haunt the corridors and panels of that same mainstream and demand explanations of why there is no empire, no gender, no class in their course outlines.

Third, there is the space existing beyond course syllabi. There is a kind of classroom contract at work in the academy, one which repeats conventional accounts of
enlightenment rationality (question everything!) but only within a prescribed space (the hour or two a week of ‘contact’ time). And yet the pre-conditions for any criticality in pedagogy clearly exceed the classroom by orders of magnitude. They include, amongst others, questions of national secondary school curriculum, socio-economic class, fees and debt, precarity in academic labour, access to knowledge, managerialism, privatisation, instrumentalisation and global ‘knowledge economies’.

Many know this, and sometimes say so. But if our attention is drawn principally to the what and how of teaching, and not to everything that lies behind, beneath and across from it, the conversation will be an impoverished one. So when we allow for the degradation of conditions for fear of disrupting lectures, or view the satisfaction of student wishes as unquestionably primary, we privilege the classroom at the expense of a wider understanding of the contemporary university. It also raises some uncomfortable dilemmas. What, after all, does it mean to pour emotional resources and labour time into provision for students who are already relatively privileged (cf. Hovey 2004)? If this is free labour, to whose benefit is it? And what is the implied model of action behind such a strategy? That, faced with the force of critical thinking, those students will abandon their accumulated social benefits and comfortable commonsense? That they will be won over by the force of better argument alone?

Some surely will be. And it seems churlish to dismiss that dialogue as ephemeral. But the affective labour of critical pedagogy in the more narrow sense is not without its opportunity costs. There is indeed something seductive about the idea of critical pedagogies. In an age where the figure of academic is beset on all sides by voracious spectres – the taxpayer, the minister, the entrepreneur, the curious public, the student-consumer, the management consultant – it offers the idea that what happens in the classroom may still matter. More than matter: might in some way emancipate. There is always the risk that, in going on as before, we indefinitely reproduce that mutilation that Rancière warns of. So we should perhaps be judicious, as well as bold, in our academic dreams.

Notes on contributor
Paul Kirby is Lecturer in International Security in the School of Global Studies at the University of Sussex. His most recent work explores feminist explanations and ethical claims in discourse around sexual violence as a weapon of war. He is a founding contributor at The Disorder Of Things (http://thedisorderofthings.com).

References