**"Teaching Autocracy in a Democratic Context"**

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**Abstract:**
Discussions of how global authoritarianism impacts the study of politics have primarily explored its effects on research practices and ethics; to date, the profession has largely overlooked the impact of global authoritarianism on the teaching component of the profession. Yet today, the world has more autocracies than democracies, and nearly three-quarters of the world's population lives in autocratic political systems. Teaching about autocracy in a democratic context is therefore essential but poses several specific challenges. These include challenges of representation, sourcing, and contextualization in syllabus design; positionality of instructors and the student body; effective pedagogical practices; and how to manage potential authoritarian intrusion into the classroom and the risk that transnational repression can shape classroom dynamics inside democracies, through visible or invisible means.

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## INTRODUCTION

Discussions of how global authoritarianism shapes the profession of political science have, thus far, largely focused on research practices and overlooked the impact of global authoritarianism on the teaching component of the profession. Some studies have discussed how particular authoritarian or hybrid-authoritarian systems constrain or shape the research experiences of the scholars who study them,[2] or offered advice on how best to navigate the constraints of authoritarian political environments during fieldwork.[3] Others have examined how professional ethics such as transparency in research should be adapted when that research is conducted in an authoritarian setting,[4] or advised on how to manage the trauma that can accompany certain (usually repressive) research contexts.[5]

Yet many scholars who conduct this research also *teach* on comparative authoritarian politics, either in a regional frame or in topical courses. Teaching about autocracy in a democratic context, however, poses a number of challenges about which the profession of political science has, thus far, said very little. For example, a search of *PS: Political Science & Politics*, the "state of the profession" journal for the American Political Science Association, turns up no articles that focus specifically on teaching autocratic politics, though I can locate articles on teaching a number of other topics, including the politics of aging, urban politics, indigenous politics, the politics of gender, Texas politics, and the politics of various literary and cultural works, from *Antigone* to *Harry Potter* and *The Daily Show*.[6]

The field is therefore overdue for a discussion of the challenges that university faculty and instructors in democratic contexts encounter when teaching about autocracy around the world. Among these challenges are decisions related to syllabus and course design, including the instructor's approach to representation and sourcing; issues presented by instructor positionality; development of effective pedagogical practices and course assignments; and approaches to managing the potential that

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[2] Chestnut Greitens and Truex, "Repressive Experiences among China Scholars;" Gentile, "Meeting the 'Organs';" Glasius et al., *Research, Ethics, and Risk in the Authoritarian Field*; Reny, "Authoritarianism as a Research Constraint;" Goode, "Redefining Russia;" Loyle, "Overcoming Research Obstacles in Hybrid Regimes."

[3] Ahram and Goode, "Researching Authoritarianism in the Discipline of Democracy;" Art, "Archivists and Adventurers;" Matelski, "On Sensitivity and Secrecy;" Malekzadeh, "Paranoia and Perspective, or How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Start Loving Research in the Islamic Republic of Iran;" Koch, "Introduction – Field Methods in "Closed Contexts"."

[4] Bellin et al., "Research Transparency in Authoritarian & Repressive Contexts;" Driscoll, "Can Anonymity Promises Possibly Be Credible in Police States?;" Shih, "Research in Authoritarian Regimes;" Carapico, "On the Moral Hazards of Field Research in Middle East Politics."

[5] Loyle and Simoni, "Researching Under Fire;" Thomson et al. eds., *Emotional and Ethical Challenges for Field Research in Africa*.

[6] One country-specific exception is Newland, "Teaching Chinese Politics in the "New Cold War"."

transnational repression could shape classroom dynamics, in visible or invisible ways. Below, I address a number of these issues, drawing from my own experience—and, where possible, that of my colleagues—to help instructors think through and prepare for some of the issues they may face in the classroom.[7]

## SYLLABUS DESIGN: WHERE TO START

Instructors teaching autocratic politics must start with basic questions of course scope and syllabus design. Not all of these decisions are within faculty control, as the length of the term, other courses offered at the instructor's institution, demographics of the student body, and other factors combine to shape the scope of any individual instructor's particular course. Nonetheless, instructors must make a series of decisions:

1) How to approach definitional questions: does one teach what an autocracy is through reference or comparison to democratic politics—treating it, in some ways, as a residual category—or simply offer a definition of autocracy that stands independently?
2) Given the heterogeneity and sheer variety of the category "autocratic politics" (especially if autocracy is treated as the residual category of "anything not qualifying as a democracy"), how much time and attention should be allocated to various issues? A course might plausibly touch on topics as wide-ranging as the origins of democracy and dictatorship; democratization versus autocratization/democratic backsliding; the importance of regime sub-types; the logic (or irrationality) of decision-making under autocracy; the role of political institutions; censorship and repression; economic performance; how regime type shapes foreign policy, conflict propensity, and battlefield effectiveness; democracy promotion in international politics; post-authoritarian transitional justice, and more.
3) How to blend cross-national and theoretically oriented work with country-specific examples? And in employing country-specific examples, how to distribute these examples both historically and geographically, given that there is much more literature on some authoritarian regimes than others?
4) How much to incorporate the foreign policy and external policies of autocracies, versus focusing on their internal workings and domestic outcomes?

[7] Given the author's geographic focus on East Asia, many of the examples in this chapter are drawn from that part of the world; that should not be construed as a recommendation for others to adopt the same focus. Each instructor's knowledge of specific issues and examples will vary.

5) How much to adopt explicitly normative positions on the consequences of democratic vs. authoritarian governance and policymaking (including accounting for any institutional norms, policies, or requirements that will shape student and institutional expectations of the approach taken)?

6) How to create assignments that best advance the learning objective of improving students' ability to understand and analyze autocratic politics?

The answers to these questions may vary based on external parameters or by instructor preference. These questions are likely, for example, to have somewhat different answers depending on the level of the course (see Chapter Four of this volume), as this can implicitly affect its purpose. Undergraduate courses are often global or regional surveys; doctoral courses are intended to familiarize students with foundational works in the field as well as the leading edge of current research programs; and courses in policy schools, typically at the masters level, often adopt a more normative and prescriptive framework, asking not simply "how do we understand and explain phenomenon X," but "what do we do about phenomenon X, or recommend that others do about it?"

The composition of the student body may matter also: students in one region of the world may be more interested in examples from that region, whether historical or contemporary, or the instructor may be encouraged to use examples that are more regionally salient. Conversely, students who are relatively familiar already with a particular region or country-context may benefit most from being provided a broader range of historical and contemporary examples in which to situate their existing knowledge. (This means that which approach instructors prioritize cannot really be asserted to be uniformly best without an understanding of the course context and objectives.) Instructors in democracies may have a student body that is primarily from democratic countries of origin, or the classroom community may include a mix of students from democracies and from autocracies. All of these questions can, and in many cases should, shape the choice of sub-topics, readings, and assignments.

Once topics have been selected, a subsequent question is how to choose the readings for that topic to appear on the syllabus. Here, it is often useful to pair official government documents intended to reflect the thinking and priorities of a particular regime or leader with—where available—reports from non-governmental organizations, domestic or international, that adopt a more critical perspective. Primary source readings of either type can also be paired with more typical academic readings that provide comparative empirical or theoretical perspective on the conditions under which

an autocratic government chooses a given policy, or the conditions under which the selection of that policy has one set of outcomes versus another, while the primary source readings provide an example of what this phenomenon looks like in the real world.

I have found, for example, that it is useful to assign short examples of county-level reports on agricultural production from China's Great Leap Forward, to help students understand how that political campaign created incentives for local exaggeration that led, in turn, to excess grain extraction and ultimately famine.[8] Typically, I have used these sources alongside both quantitative political science analyses of excess mortality during the Great Leap Forward and an excerpt from Yang Jisheng's monumental historical work *Tombstone*—an interdisciplinary combination that allows students to engage with critical perspectives on this event by examining multiple types of evidence, and by showing them a debate and set of critical perspectives that, given their authorship, cannot be easily dismissed as reducible to anti-China bias among external actors.[9] This historical knowledge can lay subsequent groundwork to layer in additional sources either for a general discussion of authoritarian inflation of contemporary economic statistics, or of how specific information problems continue to shape Chinese politics today, depending on the course scope and objectives.[10]

Instructors should be prepared to contextualize and discuss the credibility of any documents they assign—who prepared them, at what time and in what political setting, for what purpose?—with students who may discount or dismiss certain sources as government propaganda, or as biased against a particular country or group. Note that the goal, sometimes, is precisely to allow students to identify the biases and political forces that shape documents produced by non-democratic regimes, and that depending on the student body and context, it may sometimes be either helpful or even necessary to take time to engage in the same critical examination of sources from a democratic political system. One of the added values of employing these materials, in combination, is that they provide the ability to demonstrate and model for students how to critically engage with documents coming from a range of sources, a freedom that is often more limited outside a democratic context. Similar, but potentially more nuanced questions arise in incorporating the writings of academics who work and publish inside non-democracies, who may face political constraints in how and where they write that are difficult for

[8] For example, "Once Again Our County Set a New World Record of First-Crop Rice Harvest (September 1958)," and "Peng Dehuai's Letter to Chairman Mao (14 July 1959)," in Atwill and Atwill, eds., *Sources in Chinese History*.

[9] Yang, *Tombstone*; Kung and Chen, "The Tragedy of the *Nomenklatura*;" Yang et al., "A Tragedy of the *Nomenklatura*?"

[10] Magee and Doces, "Reconsidering Regime Type and Growth." On modern-day incentives that shape Chinese political statistics, see Wallace, *Seeking Truth and Hiding Facts*; and Pan and Chen, "Concealing Corruption."

students to assess: how should students understand the mix of scholarly choice and political constraint that produces scholarship within authoritarian regimes, and therefore what they can infer from that scholarship?[11]

I have also found it effective to incorporate films or literary excerpts from non-democratic contexts, particularly those written or made by citizens of those countries themselves. This can have utility for teaching autocratic politics in (at least) two ways. First, literature and film can bypass some of the contention over the credibility of various news or political reports, by giving students a hypothetical situation to focus on in discussing a particular political dynamic. A student uncomfortable with using reporting by a human rights advocacy group to examine state violence under the Ferdinand Marcos dictatorship might be able to more comfortably discuss the way in which Gina Apostol's novel, *The Gun Dealer's Daughter*, illustrates those dynamics.

Second, literature and film can sometimes vividly illustrate particular dynamics in a way that engages students more memorably than analytical writing. As comparative politics scholar Stephan Haggard writes:

> From the Latin American *caudillo* novel, to books on European fascism, Soviet rule, and authoritarian regimes in the developing world, fiction grounds politics in personal experience: uncertainty and violence, courage and cowardice, and resistance and complicity; the enduring effects of liberties stripped away…. We have much to learn from these stories about how autocracy works and fails, lives and dies, and the way it affects the lives of its victims.[12]

Before it became an internet meme, I used the bunker scene from *Downfall* (*Der Untergang*), set in the final days of Hitler's Third Reich, to illustrate pathologies in authoritarian battlefield conduct that have been well-documented in comparative scholarship across a range of historical and geographic contexts.[13] I have also used the film *To Live* (活着, *Huozhe)* to teach students about the Mao era in Chinese politics, and how large events like the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution impacted individuals and families.[14] Students have been interested to learn that *To Live* was officially

[11] Perry, "Educated Acquiescence;" Ma, "How Does an Authoritarian State Co-opt Its Social Scientists Studying Civil Society?"

[12] Haggard, "To Understand Authoritarian Rule, Read These Five Novels."

[13] On the cultural resonance of this scene, see Jones, "The Famous *Downfall* Scene Explained." For related academic scholarship, see Talmadge, *The Dictator's Army*; and Woods et al., "Saddam's Delusions."

[14] On the use of *To Live* to teach Chinese history, see Mungur, "Chinese Movies and History Education."

banned in China due to its critical portrayal of certain campaigns and events in Chinese politics—providing an opportunity for them to reflect on which political allusions in the film might or might not be sensitive and why—a s well as to learn that although director Zhang Yimou's family was labeled as counterrevolutionary during the Cultural Revolution and a number of his films were censored in China, he was eventually engaged to direct the opening ceremony of the 2008 Beijing Olympics and served as a delegate to the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference.[15]

Another value of providing a range of sources—in this case, from multiple authoritarian contexts from different parts of the world—is that these combinations can help students think through general patterns and ask questions about big concepts like "culture" in comparative and empirically grounded ways that avoid stereotyping a particular ethnic or national group. One of my more memorable and challenging teaching experiences was when a student objected that the arguments in John Dower's *War Without Mercy,* which examines the role of race in the conduct of fighting between the United States and Japan during the Second World War in the Pacific, was racist because it explained the brutality of Japanese occupation with reference to aspects of Japanese culture.[16] (For those who have not read it, the book deals equally with American racial stereotypes of Japanese and their effect on U.S. conduct of World War II.) In that (fairly fraught) case, it was useful to subsequently assign the debate over participation in genocide and mass killing that appears in Daniel Goldhagen's *Hitler's Willing Executioners* and Christopher Browning's *Ordinary Men*, showing how scholars had critically examined the role of culture in genocide and mass killing in European as well as non-white authoritarian contexts. That conversation also opened the door to incorporate recent scholarly analysis that probes how racial categories, hierarchies, and relations have shaped patterns of political violence within and across state borders (and vice versa), and gave the students some tools, language, and intellectual frameworks by which to navigate a topic that a number reported finding uncomfortable.[17]

Another question about course design touches on the incorporation of democratic backsliding or autocratization. How should instructors address democratic backsliding, especially if they are teaching in a country that has not typically featured in syllabi on "autocratic politics," but one that is nonetheless experiencing democratic erosion? In early 2025, the Varieties of Democracy project concluded that autocratizing countries numbered 45, and that the number of autocracies in the

[15] https://www.voanews.com/a/a-13-2009-03-18-voa11-68773997/410876.html.

[16] Dower, *War without Mercy*.

[17] See, for example, the special issue published in *Security Studies* 32(4-5).

international system (91) outnumbered democracies (88) for the first time in twenty years.[18] Given that the global shift toward autocratization is long-standing and ongoing, it is a topic of high global relevance and may affect classrooms in multifaceted ways in different parts of the world.

According to the V-Dem data cited above, democratic backsliding has now become relevant for instructors in a number of countries—including the United States, where American politics is typically taught as a separate subfield of political science, but where prominent comparativists are writing and speaking openly about the risk of democratic erosion in the United States,[19] major international rankings (e.g., Polity) have dropped the U.S. out of the "democracy" category,[20] and surveys of political scientists show increasing concern about the decline of American democracy.[21] Placing the United States in comparative context that is consistent with current global scholarly debate and arguments from comparative politics, however, may be perceived by students without much knowledge of that context as adopting a partisan stance, and/or could trigger polarization in the classroom. As a result, instructors will need to think through, speak about, and manage discussion on this issue carefully, and be very clear—and as objective as possible—about the standards, evidence, and analytical logic used to draw conclusions when this question is asked either of countries in which instruction is occurring, or countries from which students in the classroom come.

A final question concerns the design of assignments. In some cases, multiple-choice tests or standard essays may be appropriate and useful, but at other times, more creative assignments may be advisable. Drawing on the above discussion, for example, it may be possible to assign a book or film review that is graded on how well the student identifies and critically assesses the film's engagement with particular features of autocracy. I have also assigned strategy memos, in which students use their knowledge of the tools of autocratic rule and factors that lead to regime transition to advise a pro-democracy opposition movement on the strategy most likely to achieve democratization, or propose a strategy for an authoritarian regime facing a particular challenge to its political survival (the latter of which can simulate the "red team" functions sometimes performed in government). Again, this may be constrained by the expectations of the department, school, or university at which a particular

[18] V-Dem Institute, *Democracy Report 2025*; see also Haggard and Kaufman, *Democratic Backsliding.*

[19] Levitsky et al., "How Will the US Know When We Have Lost Our Democracy?;" Ziblatt, "Warnings from Weimar."

[20] At the time of writing, Polity's webpage read, "The USA is no longer considered a democracy and lies at the cusp of autocracy; it has experienced a Presidential Coup and an Adverse Regime Change event (8-point drop in its POLITY score)." See https://www.systemicpeace.org/

[21] Langfitt, "Hundreds of Scholars Say US Is Swiftly Heading Towards Authoritarianism."

instructor is teaching, and by specific features of the class—level, class size, and availability of teaching assistant or grader support can all affect the practical feasibility of certain assignments—but these are questions are worth thinking through in advance.

## CLASSROOM MANAGEMENT AND PEDAGOGICAL TECHNIQUE

The question of positionality, mentioned above, is not solely a matter of course design and syllabus-writing. It can also affect classroom management and pedagogy throughout the course, and, as with the aspects of teaching described above, is worth thinking through when these questions arise. In the context of teaching about autocratic politics from a democratic setting, positionality can mean a number of things. It may mean, for example, that an instructor's race or national background will affect how students perceive their teaching, similar to how Sean Yom has documented the importance of race in research into Middle Eastern politics.[22] This dynamic may be particularly pronounced if classroom examples come from a national background shared by either the instructor, or a significant part of the student body. Students should not be expected to either "speak for" their country of origin nor to automatically have more academic knowledge of that country, but their fellow students may assume that they do—and such students may expect or assume that themselves.

Similarly, students may question an instructor's ability to "get" a national history and cultural context different from their own.[23] Here, instructors may not persuade all students right away (particularly those who have been exposed to autocratic historical narratives that often present a particular country's history as unique or exceptional). Nor should persuading everyone necessarily be the goal, as spending too much time trying to prove one's credentials to a skeptic can actually undermine the instructor's authority, or simply distract too much from teaching the rest of the students. Perhaps the most effective tool I have found is simply to begin by discussing the value of comparison across systems—some of which both instructor and students are each inevitably more outsiders to than others—before these questions can arise, as the heart of comparative political analysis. Showing that knowledge that is sometimes taken-for-granted can actually be problematized and made puzzling (for example, by offering comparisons to places with similar conditions that experienced different outcomes) can, over time, replace defensive certainty with curiosity and

[22] Yom, "Why Race Matters."

[23] Yom speaks about encountering these "thinly veiled" criticisms while doing research in/on the Middle East as a Korean American scholar; Yom, "Why Race Matters."

willingness not to take conventional wisdom for granted, instead subjecting all claims to critical assessment, comparison, and testing against available evidence.

Instructors should account for, too, situations in which their positions (variously defined) shape their perceptions of the consequences of certain classroom topics and teaching techniques, to their students and to themselves. One survey of faculty teaching Chinese politics, for example, found that faculty of Asian descent are more likely to worry about personal, family, and professional repercussions for teaching Chinese politics than Caucasian faculty.[24] The survey also found that more faculty worry about consequences than have actually experienced them; this could reflect the ways in which uncertainty appears as a frequent feature of authoritarian repression (meaning that authoritarian political dynamics deliberately encourage instructors to worry about something that is rarer than they think),[25] or it could reflect that faculty who are concerned about this issue take great care to craft their teaching in ways that reduce the subsequent likelihood of a problem.[26]

These consequences or perceived consequences can be shaped by politics both in the authoritarian setting to which an instructor might be connected, but they can also be shaped by international, national, and subnational politics in the democratic context where instruction occurs. The intensification of U.S.-China geopolitical rivalry and recent wave of varied, state-level limitations on Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) programming in the United States, for example, have affected the experiences of scholars and students of Chinese descent at American universities through a range of mechanisms, from international collaboration to employment to immigration policy implementation.[27] These contextual factors are likely not only to shape instructor experiences, but to impact student perceptions and experiences of the stakes and nature of classroom conversation about certain topics unevenly, meaning that instructors should be aware of the potential, on particular topics, for heightened differentiation in how students experience the class session or material. In a democratic setting, both the nature of autocratic politics and of democratic perceptions of autocracy shape how classroom conversations will unfold.

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[24] Newland, "Teaching Chinese Politics," p. 122.

[25] Stern and Hassid, "Amplifying Silence."

[26] This latter category could include, but cannot be reduced to, self-censorship in the classroom. Studies on research in authoritarian contexts suggest that self-censorship is a real concern, but also that scholars have gone to some lengths to manage the challenges without being trapped by careerism or cowardice. See Greitens and Truex, "Repressive Experiences Among China Scholars."

[27] Ma, "How America Lost the Heart of China's Top Talent."

The positions of students may matter as well. Some university classes in democratic countries are composed almost entirely of students of that particular nationality—the large public university where I teach, for example, is required by statute to admit an incoming freshman class each year that is 90% Texan[28]—while others will be composed of a mix of students who mostly come from democratic countries of origin. Still others will draw students from countries that span the range of regime types. Each of these classroom compositions can pose pedagogical challenges. Students with little lived experience of non-democracy may be tempted to fall back on dismissive stereotypes, assuming difference rather than systematically engaging in an analytical comparative exercise; they may also be inclined to distrust information about autocratic politics that does not fit their priors, either analytical or normative, or may struggle to interpret the broader implications of a political science article that measures one particular outcome. For example, it can be tricky to teach studies showing that Chinese subnational officials respond to constituents at a rate close to legislators or other officials in Western democracies:[29] should students infer from comparable "response rates" that there is no difference in the overall responsiveness of Chinese versus American political systems to citizen preferences? If not, what are the contextual and institutional differences that make that a questionable or invalid inference to draw?[30]

Instructors should therefore think about whether and how to first identify/measure, and then proactively address, whatever preconceptions students might bring into class. Typically, the objective will be to avoid both broad stereotyping that is inconsistent with empirical patterns in the world, and "whataboutism" that can lead to empirically dubious assertions of false equivalence. While it is impossible to make a single strong recommendation that addresses all the potential preconceptions and permutations that might enter instructors' classrooms, talking with one's colleagues about their experiences with students in advance, and finding ways early in the course to collect or listen to students' assumptions, can help instructors to identify dominant preconceptions early and design both readings and class exercises that deconstruct and critically examine those assumptions over the course of the semester. (Peer teaching observations, if these are accepted at one's institution, can also provide helpful feedback in this realm.) Sometimes using the first course meeting(s) for a simple definitional

[28] See https://news.utexas.edu/2021/09/21/automatic-admissions-threshold-remains-at-6-for-ut-austin/.

[29] Distelhorst and Hou, "Constituency Service under NonDemocratic Rule;" Chen et al., "Sources of Authoritarian Responsiveness."

[30] Brown, "Contacting, Petitioning, and Satisfaction with Government Responsiveness."

exercise—what is democracy? what is dictatorship?—can surface some of these assumptions early, in ways that an instructor can then quickly adapt subsequent course material to address.

Pedagogical approaches beyond instructor lectures and class discussions—such as exercises and simulations—can also aid students in gaining a greater understanding of autocratic politics. These tools allow students to apply what they have read in an interactive setting, whether about domestic politics or questions of international relations and foreign policy involving autocratic countries. Student participants can more easily take on the roles of particular actors in non-democratic political systems and operate according to their logic, without having to personally endorse the actions taken or recommendations made in the role-playing—and without assuming (or sometimes, worrying) that others in a simulation will think they are endorsing that role or behavior either.

There are a number of different ways to incorporate simulations and exercises, many of which are currently shared only informally among colleagues in a given topic area or subfield. Idean Salehyan uses a card game with candy to illustrate how resource distribution can shape outcomes among rulers, elites, and citizens in democratic vs. autocratic settings.[31] Joseph Woldense examines how a class exercise simulating a coup can be useful for teaching about certain features of autocratic politics (see Chapter Seven of this volume). William James Stover argues that diplomatic role-playing simulations done jointly with participants from universities based in the Middle East can both help students understand strategic interactions and policy processes in inter-state diplomacy, and also help build their empathy and understanding of the perspectives and incentives of other actors.[32] Mary Gallagher uses a simulation based on a local industrial disaster in China, where students role-play various stakeholders in the Chinese political system, to teach about how the structure of China's party-state system affects its response to emerging domestic issues.[33] I have adapted the latter exercise for my own teaching, and have also created a parallel exercise based on the 2023 "spy balloon crisis" between the United States and China, to teach about how China's foreign policymaking process, Chinese nationalism, and crisis management shape the U.S.-China bilateral relationship. Students often respond positively to these kinds of exercises; one commented, "I hadn't really expected to be able to understand what it might feel like to work for the Chinese government, from the inside-out; I still

[31] Salehyan, "Democracy vs. Autocracy."

[32] Stover, "Teaching and Learning Empathy."

[33] Many thanks to Mary Gallagher for providing this example, and for her willingness to have it shared in this chapter. Author's communication with Mary Gallagher, January 2023 and May 2025.

realize how much I don't know, but this at least gave me the sense of what being a bureaucrat in China might be like."

Important pedagogical and ethical questions arise when one contemplates how to teach the darker aspects of autocratic politics, such as repression, state violence, and genocide (some of which were alluded to earlier in this chapter). Syllabi or courses that focus too much on the institutional trappings of authoritarian regimes—the role of legislatures, constitutions, and courts, for example—risk sanitizing the lived reality of authoritarianism for students in a way that removes their ability to fully grapple with the human and moral stakes of the questions the course is designed to engage. Many instructors will not be satisfied with a course that fails to convey those stakes to students. On the other hand, an instructor who cannot know the background experiences of his/her student body must take care with when and how these materials appear in the class (see Dara Conduit's chapter on integrating an ethic of care; Chapter Eight of this volume).

In my experience, it has worked best to place these sessions some weeks into the course, when the instructor has had the opportunity to earn the trust of students, and when the students have gained some familiarity and practice engaging in civil debate, discussion, and intellectual disagreement with one another. I also generally warn students in the preceding class—for example, before the days that I teach the debate between Christopher Browning and Goldhagen on how to understand "ordinary" people's participation in the Holocaust—that the upcoming material is sensitive and will be difficult, and requires them to approach this class session, even more than others, with respect and thoughtfulness. I also end that particular class a few minutes early and remain available in the room to give students some time to process the discussion and make their transitions, avoiding an overly abrupt switch from a potentially disturbing discussion to the chemistry lab or athletic practice.

A final issue having to do with presentation and pedagogical tone has to do with when and how instructors employ humor in the classroom, which can be tempting given the sometimes-grim nature of the subject matter. There is a normative case for the use of humor and satire: artists and cultural critics, from Charlie Chaplin to Badiucao, have used mockery to, in the words of the Human Rights Foundation, "disempower authorities who want to curate an image of absolute power and control."[34] Milood Amroni, perhaps Libya's most popular comedian, spent 30 years mocking Qaddafi; Mahir Hasssan mocked Saddam Hussein in a film so pointed that when it aired on Kurdish television,

[34] Human Rights Foundation, "The Silencing of Dissident Artists."

Saddam ordered the entire cast assassinated.[35] Democracy activists like Natan Sharansky have, themselves, spoken about the importance of humor for surviving persecution.[36]

Again, however, positionality, presentation, and rapport all matter: it is one thing to mock the oddities and habits of dictators as an act of political courage and resistance to tyranny from below, and another to laugh about it from the comforts of a democratic classroom. As one human rights activist wrote:

> Yes, North Korea has long been ruled by an eccentric dynasty of portly dictators with bad haircuts…But it takes no valor and costs precious little to joke about these things safely oceans away from North Korea's reach. Kim Jong Un is human, but North Korea is not funny. One day, how will we react when liberated concentration camp survivors have to learn that the world was more interested in the oddities of the oppressors than the torment of the oppressed?[37]

Charlie Chaplin, who famously mocked Hitler's territorial ambitions in his 1940 film, *The Great Dictator*—which was banned in every country under Nazi occupation—looked back differently on the film in his 1964 autobiography, writing, "Had I known of the actual horrors of the German concentration camps, I could not have made *The Great Dictator*; I could not have made fun of the homicidal insanity of the Nazis."[38] This is not a suggestion to categorically prohibit humor, which is often an effective pedagogical tool and helpful for creating moments of temporary levity that help pace a classroom discussion. It is, instead, a caution that instructors teaching autocratic politics will want to think carefully about when and how they employ it.

## AUTHORITARIAN INFLUENCE IN DEMOCRACIES: TRANSNATIONAL REPRESSION IN THE CLASSROOM

Many of the above points are grounded in, and assume, the relative safety of talking about autocratic politics in a democratic university setting. However, a final set of issues that can affect the

[35] Birsel, "Libyan Comedian Says Harder to Joke Without Gaddafi;" Armstrong, "When Political Comedy is a Case of Life or Death."

[36] Sharansky, *Fear No Evil.*

[37] Hong, "North Korea."

[38] Barber, "*The Great Dictator.*"

teaching of autocracy and democratic politics involves the fact that the boundaries are increasingly porous, and authoritarian politics have, in recent years, become extra-territorialized in various ways.[39] This includes, at times, intrusion into democratic countries' universities and colleges, and appears in several different facets of campus life, from cultural events to student organizations to guest speakers to classroom sessions.[40] In the United States and globally, most attention to authoritarian influence on classroom education has been focused on China, but China is not the only authoritarian regime whose extraterritorial reach can shape a democratic university classroom.

Transnational repression and authoritarian influence inside classrooms can take several different forms. First, students from authoritarian countries of origin may have received education in primary or secondary school based on content containing very different historical or political narratives. As a result, a course that unpacks the different features of democracy or dictatorship in a democratic and intellectually critical context may contradict what the student(s) were previously taught and the worldview they bring to class. This may affect the positions they take in classroom discussion, such that they are either defensive or antagonistic to implicit or explicit critiques of the form of government in their country of origin. Whether from an individual student with a strong voice in class discussion, or from a critical mass of students who react collectively, the result can be the weaponization of social pressure, and a dynamic that Sarah McLaughlin calls "sensitivity exploitation...appeals to cultural sensitivity to justify or demand censorship of political speech critical of authoritarian governments."[41]

This dynamic is challenging because it can be used by students to shut down peers, inside the classroom or beyond it. An instructor likely has limited tools to control the latter, broader environment, but leads a classroom that is nonetheless shaped by it and is therefore responsible for how he/she responds to a context that he/she may only partially understand. Again, offering comparative context, proactively laying intellectual groundwork, gaining early awareness of the underlying preconceptions with which students enter the classroom, and strongly enforcing expectations of civil debate from the start of each course are all critical tools for ensuring that this dynamic, if it appears, does not overly skew the overall direction and tenor of classroom conversation. (And in best-case scenarios, the

[39] Glasius, "Extraterritorial Authoritarian Practices;" McLaughlin, *Authoritarians in the Academy*.

[40] Gorokhovskaia and Vaughn, "Addressing Transnational Repression on Campuses in the United States;" Epstein, "How China Infiltrated US Classrooms;" Rogin, "Opinion: Another University Learns the Hard Way About Chinese Censorship on Campus;" Allen-Ebrahimian, "China's Long Arm Reaches into American Campuses."

[41] McLaughlin, *Authoritarians in the Academy*, p. 19.

instructor can use these tools to provide pedagogical frameworks that help challenge these students' preconceptions over the course of a given semester.)

In other cases, students may feel more explicit pressure or a sense of obligation to "speak for" the government in their country of origin. A number of authoritarian governments have mechanisms of outreach, monitoring, and inducing responsiveness even while students are physically enrolled in and taking classes in a university in a democratic country. As Mary Gallagher has noted, in recent years, China has employed corporatist principles of organization combined with United Front work tactics to bolster its presence and activities on American university campuses, including through Chinese Student Scholar Associations (CSSAs), in ways that violate basic pluralist precepts of American higher education and promote the ideas associated with the Chinese government and party-state.[42]

One can see how this might affect classroom discussion: what happens in a class session that seeks to explore and define democracy versus autocracy if, for example, a student, or group of students, repeats the assertion made by the Chinese party-state that China is simply a "whole process people's democracy"?[43] (China is, by nearly all standard measures used in political science, one of the least democratic or most closed-autocratic political systems in the world,[44] but Chinese students based abroad are not exempt from the requirement to engage in "patriotic education" designed to inculcate political loyalty.[45]) When students espouse autocratic dogma or propaganda talking points, instructors will have to decide, based on the composition of the classroom and the unfolding discussion, whether it is sufficient to provide credible evidence and analytical tools for students to reach their own opinions in a relatively hands-off manner, or whether spillover effects on other students' learning mean that it may be necessary to more directly 'correct' such statements. Again, there is unlikely to be a one-size-fits-all dynamic, as the decision will depend on a combination of factors: how vocal that individual student or group of students is; how other students react; how much time in class is available at the moment the issue comes up; the sources already assigned or potentially available to assign that could facilitate critical engagement with the point-of-view being offered; and the rapport or credibility the instructor has established with the individual student(s) and the other members of the class.

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[42] Gallagher, "Corporatist Organization in a Pluralist Setting."

[43] For an English-language sample of this discourse, see Xinhua, "A Deep Dive into Xi Jinping's Stewardship of Whole-process People's Democracy."

[44] V-Dem Institute, *Democracy Report 2025*, pp. 9, 14-15.

[45] Buckley, "China Says its Students, Even Those Abroad, Need More 'Patriotic Education'."

Today, instructors must also account for the risk of authoritarian surveillance and monitoring in a democratic setting, even if that monitoring is not visible or known at the time it occurs (or after). This can have two problematic effects: it can persuade students not to speak freely even when that is the expectation of them in a democratic classroom, or it can lead them to speak freely on the false belief that the classroom is not monitored and is an intellectually "safe space," thereby making them vulnerable to potential political consequences if they are subsequently reported to authorities. In the first scenario, years of education in an authoritarian educational context may make some students reluctant to speak openly about things that they have learned are politically controversial even after they reach democratic classrooms, especially if they are accustomed to self-censoring for safety reasons or have internalized general norms of classroom conduct wherein challenging the regime's preferred narrative is not acceptable or advisable. In such cases, instructors should think about how to weight "classroom participation" as a component of student grades, as such students may arrive in the classroom with vastly different socialization and perceptions of what appropriate "participation" entails than the norms of the university where the course is being taught.

In the second scenario, students (including, sometimes, those who come from more authoritarian educational settings and are excited about engaging in a freer intellectual climate) and instructors must be aware of the possibility for technical or human monitoring among students in a classroom and must acknowledge that that risk cannot be mitigated entirely. While individual commitment by the instructor and an informed institutional environment that is also committed to freedom of speech and open academic inquiry can reduce these risks, they cannot provide complete guarantees. Freedom House has reported, for example, that "a graduate student who attended a small seminar class covering topics in human rights was asked by officials from her origin country's embassy to report on contributions made by fellow students from her country."[46]

The rise of virtual class sessions during the COVID-19 pandemic also exacerbated concerns about the vulnerability of online education to technological surveillance. The Association for Asian Studies pointed out that Zoom was vulnerable to monitoring by Chinese authorities, and a number of China-focused faculty pointed out that virtual teaching raised particular issues for discussing "sensitive" issues if these discussions either violated Chinese law (e.g., the National Security Law, whose designation of offenses does not depend on the geographic location of the speaker or their nationality)

[46] Gorokhovskaia and Vaughn, "Addressing Transnational Repression on Campuses in the United States."

or came to the attention of technologically-empowered Chinese authorities. A note in the syllabus that prohibits the use of monitoring or recording without permission is helpful, but not particularly enforceable in the face of, for example, a determined and technically sophisticated authoritarian intelligence agency.

Recommendations on how to manage this risk take a number of forms. Some faculty have recommended that instructors include or send a note flagging these risks—and the university's and instructor's inability to mitigate them entirely—for students, who can then make more informed choices about whether and how to participate in a given course.[47] Other recommendations include prohibiting the use of default recording, and "amnesty policies" that allowed students who perceived participation to pose risks to opt out of particular discussions or sessions. In addition, faculty have recommended that instructors, rather than graduate teaching assistants, lead particularly sensitive sessions, and that these sessions be opened with a reminder about expectations that classrooms follow the "Chatham House Rule"[48] around attribution, as well as other norms of civic discourse appropriate to debate in an academic setting. Each of these tools is useful for establishing norms that reduce the likelihood of transnational monitoring and/or censorship, but they cannot remove it entirely.

## CONCLUSION

This chapter has examined the challenges that instructors in democratic university contexts encounter when teaching about autocracy and autocratic politics. Among the challenges are matters of syllabus and course design, including the choice of sources and examples; use of effective pedagogical practices; and approaches to managing the potential influence of transnational repression on classroom dynamics. Awareness of each of these potential issues is the first step in maintaining and improving instructors' ability to effectively teach about this important and long-lasting aspect of world politics.

[47] Gueorgueiv et al., "How To Teach China This Fall."

[48] The Chatham House Rule states: "When a meeting, or part thereof, is held under the Chatham House Rule**,** participants are free to use the information received, but neither the identity nor the affiliation of the speaker(s), nor that of any other participant, may be revealed." See https://www.chathamhouse.org/about-us/chatham-house-rule.

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