

NEWS

for Teachers of Political Science

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and International Relations:
approaches, theories,
teaching strategies

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*Film is the greatest teacher, because
it teaches not only through the brain,
but through the whole body.*

— Vsevolod Pudovkin

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The thesis of this article is simple: the primary function of political scientists is to nurture civic skills and political understanding within our students and those who read our literature. The principal component of both skill and understanding is the capacity to visualize and interpret events through several quite different metaphors. Sensitivity to alternate metaphors comes through liberal education, as traditionally defined. A capacity to recognize the limitations to any given metaphor depends, first, on puzzling life experiences, secondly, on a reservoir of alternate ways of viewing the world, and thirdly, on educational experiences that cultivate deep analytical thought and build self-confidence with thinking differently than other people do. If it is true that a liberal education frees people to recognize perspective, predisposition, and prejudice, and if politics is indeed the art and science that must integrate into courses of action values about nature, humanity, society, and the Divine, then political scientists have an enormous stake in the general education curricula of our universities and colleges. How we dispatch that responsibility, in turn, has enormous implications for civil society.

That thesis propounded in the abstract, I now want to turn into a raconteur. In the telling of stories about ourselves or others, we often-times shed light on the forces that close our minds to events or open our minds to new understanding. For it is really in our life experiences as civic actors that we bridge metaphysics, theory, and practice. And it is in reflecting on these life experiences that we draw lessons for curricular objectives and professional performance that may help others bridge metaphysics, theory, and practice. As some readers recognize, this autobiographical device is similar to that used by contemporary theologians to sharpen an hermeneutic. To the stories:

Story 1

Twenty-odd years ago I left graduate school in deep confusion. I had set unattainable goals: I wanted to have a Ph.D. in hand and be administrative assistant to the Governor of Indiana, both by age 26. I was unmarried, celibate, and single-mindedly devoted to my studies and my politics. However, some terrible fears caught up with me that fall and I couldn't function in school. As a last resort I went home, the family doctor diagnosed my case as severe mononucleosis, and put me to bed for two months. (Mononucleosis is a clinical diagnosis but is probably often used as a gentle euphemism for psychological malaise or breakdown.) From my bed I gradually finished off the passel of incompletes I, like so many graduate students, had accumulated. I decided to take a job dealing with other people's problems. I was going to be the Northern Indiana field examiner for the newly-created Indiana Civil Rights Commission. Even though the appointment was wired, I needed six months' experience in the public welfare field before I could meet minimum qualification standards. I took the civil service exam for case-worker, ended up twenty-fourth of twenty-eight candidates, but this being Indiana, the first twenty-three were bumped on technicalities by my political patron, and I arrived at the Lake County Department of Public Welfare in Gary on a bitter cold day in January 1962. I guess I grew up on the streets of the Central District of Gary but I wouldn't advise it as a form of psychotherapy.

Why bother with all the autobiographical stuff? Because out of confusion comes confusion. Sometimes you cannot puzzle over events that deserve puzzling unless you are already disoriented. Alternate metaphors seldom present themselves when experience already makes sense. Back to Gary.

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The Scene is unforgettable. Charlie Chaplin in *The Great Dictator* plays Adenoid Hynkel, a Fuhrer-figure, modeled comically after Adolf Hitler. Hynkel, alone in a large room, wanders over to a world-globe, picks it up, and begins to playfully bounce the world into the air, buoyantly kicking and tapping the world into the air like his little toy balloon. Suddenly, the balloon explodes.

The comical image is powerful. Here is Chaplin, the Little Tramp, holding Hitler up to ridicule, mocking his desires to do with the real world, what Hynkel does with the globe. Chaplin makes a forceful political statement through his comic talents. In this brief scene, Hitler's power-hungry drives are conveyed to the audience while Hitler is being ridiculed at the same time.

There are many ways to make political statements. Speeches, statistics, songs, books, and articles all are used as conveyors of political messages. As *The Great Dictator* illustrates, movies can also serve as political statements. Through the dramatic or comical presentation of ideas and events, film makers can — and often do — present political issues to the public. To be effective, these messages must also be entertaining, but within this context, political issues can be presented.

In *Duck Soup*, the Marx Brothers are not only funny, they are also making statements about the absurdity of war and diplomacy. In *Citizen Kane*, Orson Welles is not only presenting the story of a personal tragedy, he is also making statements about power and influence in America. In *Ninotchka*, Ernst Lubitsch is not only presenting an endearing romantic-comedy, he is also reinforcing the predominant prejudices concerning life in the Soviet Union versus life in Western culture. All of these movies are entertaining, all are political.

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