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"To be a teacher is not to say: This is the way it is, nor is it to assign lessons and the like. No, to be a teacher is truly to be the learner. Instruction begins with this, that you, the teacher, learn from the learner, place yourself in what he has understood and how he has understood it..."

Søren Kierkegaard, *The Point of View* (1998: 46)

The popular media is awash with negative stereotypes of the ignorance of Americans about geography and world affairs. There is even a widely circulated video clip from the Australian satirical program CNNN in which reporters ask Americans to identify which countries the USA should invade as part of the War on Terror. They are asked to locate the target countries on a map and provide reasons for their choice. While the reporters mislead the people who were interviewed with mislabeled world maps, the answers still reveal a shocking lack of basic understandings of the world (<http://video.google.com/videoplay?docid=-2587661313510275113>). Even official surveys of high-school and college students in the USA do not produce much better results in terms of geographic literacy or concern for international affairs (Carr, 2004; National Geographic, 2006). This makes it a challenge for professors of political geography to get and keep undergraduate students interested in their subject.

So how can one broaden students' understanding of the world, sensitize them to the territorial foundation of politics, and make them see that there are more dimensions and scales to international relations than the USA? One possibility is to turn the teaching process around as the quote by Kierkegaard aptly illustrates. Rather than trying to communicate concepts through class lectures, readings, and discussions, I ask my undergraduate students to teach me (and each other) about a current event through a major group research project, such as "B/ordering Iraq", which asks students to conceive of new territorial boundaries for Iraq. With this approach I follow up on the call already issued in 1966 by Julian Minghi to "develop thinking along more problem-oriented lines and to apply concepts so developed in a regional context that is relevant, clear, and unrepentitious (Minghi, 1966: 370). Such problem-based teaching is also in the tradition of Paolo Freire's critical pedagogy (Freire, 2005; Freire & Faundez, 1989) and provides a useful antidote to geography's reputation among students of being "a boring subject requiring them to memorize the names of state capitals and mountain ranges" (Merrett, 2000: 214–215).

I preface and contextualize the project with a lecture on Iraq that addresses the global geopolitical context related to petroleum resources; the regional historical context of imperial competition between European colonial powers and the Ottoman Empire; the local context of boundary changes; territorial claims; and religious, ethnic and resource access fractures. Finally, a brief overview of recent major conflicts—Iraq–Iran war and the Gulf Wars—underlines the link between the territorial configuration of Iraq and political instability. This sets the stage for a discussion of the rationale of the project and I distribute the handout (see below). I have found the scenario to be an effective way to get students into the right mindset for the advocacy-based research that is at the core of the project.

The logistics of the project might appear daunting (there are a total of eight student groups: four commissions, each with two sections), but the research for each group is straightforward enough to be carried out with minimal input from the teacher and I always time the research phase to coincide with my conference attendance. To divide the class into groups, I have students draw paper slips with the name of the commissions to ensure that the groups have diverse compositions. The last time I taught it, the class had 38 students which meant that each group had 4–5 members. This worked well, but anything larger would be detrimental to effective collaboration. Group work has its own challenges, but is justified by the benefit of cooperative and collaborative learning and the ability to carry out a substantial research effort in a brief period of

time. The self-evaluation I require from each student has proven to be an effective way to make group dynamics transparent and to forestall—or in some cases at least to catch—free-riding.

The two assignments—a 10-minute presentation and a 5-page paper—require the students to develop a clear and concise argument; to back up claims with solid evidence in the form of scholarly sources and primary data; and to interpret facts through political geographic concepts, such as Hartshorne's centrifugal and centripetal forces (Hartshorne, 1950). Although Hartshorne's functional approach is usually derided as descriptive and naive in contemporary texts, it is a terrific tool to express the impact of the basic territorial dimensions of a state, such as boundaries, shape, size, core areas, and the location of the capital on its viability and cohesion. These basic concepts are discussed early in the semester and the exercise allows students to reengage with them in a real-world case. Background notes comprise pertinent sections from *An Atlas of World Affairs* (Boyd, 2007), but students are required to conduct their own literature search to obtain specific information on the situation in Iraq.

Asking the students to link facts and concepts in an advocacy-style paper and presentation means they have "to interpret and defend positions on controversial issues," which "is an effective means of promoting synthesis of course material" (Shelley, 1998: 112). As Arlene Shelley (1998: 114) points out, advocacy is often challenging for students because they are fearful that they might take a position not shared by the teacher or one that is incorrect or biased, but there is little concern in this case because the position is pre-assigned.

The two presentations for each commission are followed by 20–25 minutes of discussion. Having two separate sections for each commission is highly advisable since the competition spurs students to work harder and makes it clear that it is possible to have often significantly different solutions to satisfy the demands of the same group. Watching the presentations by other groups also allows students to gauge the effectiveness of different delivery styles and—particularly important for geography—how visual evidence can best be incorporated to support arguments. By the time the proposals of all commissions have been discussed, my students and I will have gained valuable insights.

Students will see how different groups can interpret history and the attachment of a people to the land in drastically different ways and how there can be more than one legitimate claim to the same territory. Moreover, they learn to appreciate how difficult it is to find equitable territorial solutions and that it is unfair to simply dismiss the UN as being an ineffective institution given the formidable challenges it faces in mediating conflicting claims in the context of territorial sovereignty, a notion that is predicated on giving one group exclusive claim to a given territory. The crucial importance of scale emerges when local demands for territory are juxtaposed with regional considerations, such as the danger that neighboring countries restrict access to water, to the Gulf, or to oil pipelines, and global issues such as the role of the UN, and the interest of major world powers.

As the teacher, I will have benefited from hearing alternative interpretations than those predicated by my own positionality. Even in the more homogenous academic settings in some European universities (Raento, 2008: 347), classes have some diversity, be it in terms of class, race, gender, sexual orientation, national origin, or scholastic skills, which will be reflected in the positions taken by the different student groups. In the context of such differing views, the teacher's voice becomes one of many and will be exposed to a healthy dose of skepticism rather than simply being taken as the only acceptable stance. Hierarchy in the classroom and disciplinary power are replaced by "the power to affirm, enlighten, and reinforce achievement, without punishing failure" (Merrett, 2000: 214). The discussions also show that inquiry cannot, and should not, be value free. The group research project allows me to promote positive change through critical engagement as demanded by Harvey (1984) without imposing my own political views. It is teaching through collaboration rather than indoctrination.

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GG215 – Political Geography

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GROUP RESEARCH PROJECT: B/ordering Iraq

Rationale: The modern state system is premised on the idea of territorial sovereignty. As a result, the territorial dimensions of a state, such as boundaries, shape, size, core areas, and the location of the capital play a key role in its viability. Some states have favorable territorial conditions, while others struggle to overcome challenges such as a fragmented state territory. The goal of this exercise is to use a concrete case, the division of Iraq into separate states, to get an understanding of the influence of different territorial aspects on a state.

Scenario: Frustrated by criticisms of his policies at home and abroad President George W. Bush decides to take a bold step to solve the quagmire in Iraq. At a UN cocktail party he takes Ban Ki-moon aside and proposes the creation of separate states in Iraq. Bush argues that the international community should receive this favorably since it would offer the possibility to give the Kurds the national state they were promised, but then denied at the end of World War I. Unfortunately, the party turns rather raucous as the evening progresses and a member of the press overhears a song about “50 ways to leave your brother” that Bush and Ki-moon have concocted in their inebriated exuberance. The news spreads like a wildfire and Kurdish, Shiite, and Sunni nationalists immediately start developing plans for the creation of new states in Iraq.

Exercise: The class will be divided into four territorial commissions (each has two sections): UN, Kurds, Shiite, and Sunni. Each commission is asked to develop plans that help in the division of Iraq into separate states. If you are a member of the Kurdish, Shiite or Sunni commissions, you only need to consider a territorial solution for your own group (choosing whatever territorial configuration you deem best). The UN groups have complete freedom in developing new territorial solutions and can divide Iraq into any number of new states. Your tasks are as follows

1. Define the boundaries of the new state(s).
2. Locate a capital in the new state(s).
3. Consider the impact of centripetal and centrifugal forces in the new state(s).
4. Prepare a 10-minute presentation (clearly structured and concise) and a 5-page paper for our class meetings in week 11-12. The time limit will be enforced to ensure that we have enough time for question and answer periods. See the

schedule below for the precise date that the presentation and paper for your group is due. Your presentation and paper should provide a rationale for the territorial configuration and design of your new state(s). Your argument should be reasonable and be able to elicit at least some support from the international community. Be sure to make reference to scholarly sources and pay attention to different geographic scales, such as the implications of the new boundaries for the geopolitical situation in the Middle East. Please use visuals, such as overheads or power point slides for your presentation.

You should use the regular class times on Wednesday 4/16/08 and Friday 4/18/08 to develop this plan. However, you might want to move to an alternative location, such as the library, to ensure that your plans are kept secret. Keep in mind that you will have extra time to work on this project since there are no regular class readings assigned during the two weeks that are dedicated to this project. I know some of you might be uncomfortable about working in a group, but being a member of a team has become a dominant feature of most employment situations. Though at times this might be challenging or even frustrating, you will acquire a valuable and rewarding skill. Moreover, each of you is required to submit a brief self-evaluation (up to 250 words) that outlines your individual contribution to the project.

To help you get started on the project, each group will be provided with maps of Iraq and background notes on the situation. You have to collect additional information to strengthen your argument. The following links should also be useful in carrying out your task:

1. Iraq website of the U.S. Department of State:
<http://www.state.gov/p/nea/ci/c3212.htm>
2. CIA World Factbook:
<https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/iz.html>
3. Map Library of the University of Texas
<http://www.lib.utexas.edu/maps/iraq.html>

Presentation Schedule and due dates for papers:

4/21/08 – Sunni Commission #1, Sunni Commission #2

4/23/08 – Shiite Commission #1, Shiite Commission #2

4/25/08 – Kurdish Commission #1, Kurdish Commission #2

4/28/08 – UN Commission #1, UN Commission #2