TEACHING POLITICAL ECONOMY ACROSS DISCIPLINARY BOUNDARIES

Anna Sturman and Madelaine Moore

Teaching political economy often means doing so from a different disciplinary home. In Australian universities, as elsewhere, political economists are increasingly positioned within other disciplines such as geography, sociology and environmental studies. This article, co-authored by two political economists who work in environmental humanities and human geography, reflects on some of the pedagogical, political, and institutional dimensions of teaching in this context.

Teaching political economy across disciplinary boundaries is both a challenge and a radical opportunity. Framing and mobilising our conceptual tools requires constant translation between varied interlocutors and equally diverse theory. From Marxian and feminist theories of value, ecological thought, postcolonial critique, and empirical environmental questions, we must be ready to find the opening or connection for students that will make things 'click'. When, as is often the case, we provide students with their first taste of Marx and explicit critiques of capitalism, there is an imperative to 'go back to basics' so that we don't hide behind jargon or concepts without being able to explain them succinctly. Reflecting on our experiences in building and delivering curricula around these needs, we argue that diverse disciplinary orientations and provocations open pedagogical spaces in spite of the neoliberal university's ongoing drive to foreclose them. Teaching in other disciplines, we can use political economy as an evolving toolkit for inquiry and struggle, rather than a bounded canon. It also helps us build new generations of students armed with critical ideas geared at actually creating change.

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The following reflections, structured as a conversational dialogue across our common experiences, are loosely grouped across three themes. First, we describe our university contexts: where we work, the types of students we engage with, and our own positions in this environment as early career academics. Second, we offer some anecdotes on students and classroom dynamics, noting some of the frictions that can emerge when teaching critical political economy to diverse cohorts, as well as the possibilities these produce. We finish by turning our attention to how the conditions of our employment inflect the strategies open to us; and what it means to take risks and trust in our pedagogical instincts – and in our students. Teaching political economy from the 'outside' as early career academics demands not only nimble theoretical skills but also institutional courage – to open spaces for contestation, solidarity, and alternative imaginaries.

Our university contexts

Higher education is a contradictory place. We are tasked with creating (training?) highly capable people who can perform skilled work, ideally by applying critical thinking skills to complex problems. We are also tasked with keeping our 'customers' happy and continually attempting to do much more with much less funding. The ongoing shift away from higher education as a public good has sharpened the context for everyone involved (Connell 2019). There are all sorts of consequences of the fracturing of the university for critical social scientists, including where we end up, how and what we teach, and our capacity to teach that. For us, as political economists, there are fewer good jobs to be found and, where they do exist, they are not always in the places we first would have looked. We have both had experience working in political economy departments before transferring our skill sets to roles in policy, environmental humanities and geography, teaching at elite Australian universities.

Madelaine: I was trained in global political economy (Master's and PhD) in Kassel University, Germany, after working for a couple of years in the union movement. I completed my undergraduate studies in International Relations and Politics and then undertook a Master's program that was a political economy course designed for international trade union workers. In this way, my theoretical engagement was always quite applied but, when entering academic political-economy spaces I felt often on the back foot, having not had a focused political economy undergraduate or honours

training. After spending four years as a postdoctoral researcher and lecturer at Bielefeld University in Global Social Policy, I am now a lecturer in Environmental Humanities/Studies at UNSW. I hesitated to apply for this position as I had seen myself as a political economist rather than someone in the Environmental Humanities. Upon reflection and a year into the role, however, I now think that my work and teaching experience maps very well onto the Environmental Humanities and Geography. I am surrounded by geographers and slowly becoming one, whilst also being the only self-defined political economist in the group (others would say they are political ecologists). Because of this, my research is becoming more spatial and located in 'place' while still focusing on how this intersects with broader dynamics of global capitalism.

At Kassel University, I taught Labour Policies and Globalisation and Global Political Economy students who were well versed in political economy at postgraduate level. At Bielefeld, because my teaching subjects (political economy under the guise of social/environmental policy) were open electives, my students were diverse across undergraduate/postgraduate levels and from almost every discipline. At UNSW, I teach into the Master of Environmental Management, which is about 80-85 percent international students from very diverse backgrounds (STEM, policy, politics, geography) and often with some prior work experience. My teaching at the undergraduate level is in Environmental Justice, which is a core subject for third year Geography and Environmental Humanities students and is also open to many students coming from law, science, and education.

Anna: I trained in the Political Economy department at USyd, coming to it from undergraduate degrees in Law and Political Theory. So, I have always felt somewhat 'half in, half out' of political economy. When I arrived at Sydney, I felt deeply unsure of myself and self-excluded from departmental events for a long time, hoping that I would eventually feel sufficiently at home with the new theories to also feel at home in the department. With a few more years under my belt, I feel a slight irony in my earlier experience of self-imposed separatism; and, now being more 'in the club', I see how membership in the discipline can lead to a sense of 'outsider' status in the broader higher education sector.

I presently work in the School of Geosciences at USyd as a Lecturer in Human Geography. My research interests map extremely well over to human geography, as I've always been interested in questions of

environmental crisis and struggle, and the people and places that are involved in these. The School of Geosciences is home to several researchers working at the intersections of broadly defined political economic geography, so I cannot claim to be isolated in that sense. However, as the newest (and temporary) member of the School, trained explicitly in political economy, there is a sense of finding my way and negotiating the blurry boundaries between the two disciplines, being mindful of the levels of abstraction with which different arguments engage. I find that this mediation as a researcher sharpens further in relation to teaching, where the concerns of geographic analysis must be brought to bear, not only in the context of the student cohort, but in relation to the other teaching happening in the School.

I currently teach into the Geography and Environmental Studies majors at senior undergraduate and Masters' levels. I'm teaching core development theory and what we call 'integrative research practice' which, for our purposes, means bringing physical and human geography together. I get a mix of undergraduates, mainly from the Faculties of Science, Arts and Social Science, and Law. With how the different degree pathways are structured, my classes with them can either be their first brush with materialist critical social science or, if I'm lucky, they will have been exposed to these theories through earlier geography units. Either way, I can see how tricky it can be for them to shift into this way of thinking amidst all their other units of study, especially because at senior undergraduate level it's typically not easy stuff anyway. Recent discussions among the geographers in my School have seen us reflecting on how to manage this dynamic. We're exploring how we might cohere the different elements that individual teachers are bringing to their courses, making sure that the political economic geography concepts build across the degree structure.

Class dynamics

Having established who we are, we now reflect on some of the dynamics that have emerged in our classrooms. The aim here is to show some of the generative tensions as well as some of the difficulties that we have experienced, using short vignettes to draw out the ideas we discuss.

Who is in the room? Critical theory versus personal attacks

Our students are diverse. We have many privileged students, exchange students, international students, students from powerful families, the elite (and actual royalty). We also have many students from working class and socially disadvantaged backgrounds. In disciplinary terms, our students tend to be interested in environmental issues, sometimes coming at these from hard science backgrounds but often from less critical orientations that don't stop to unpack the abstractions! This diversity, both in social class backgrounds and disciplinary training, creates a sometimes tense and resistant teaching environment. Because political economy immediately homes in on power, presenting explanatory frameworks which tend to draw out power relations in capitalism (Harvey 2018), we immediately force a reckoning with the world that is not inherent in other disciplines *e.g.* with students in Law or International Relations where there is a tendency to present normative arguments that gloss over the issues on which we focus (Legal Form Editorial Collective 2017).

A simple, first principles approach in teaching is necessary here: allowing students to situate themselves in relation to the unit of study by taking time early in the semester to consider how their experiences within and beyond the university are influencing their perspectives.

Anna: One particularly vivid experience came alive for me when exploring development theory with senior level undergraduate students. In the final week of the class, I bring in the frame of more-than-human life in relation to development, exploring the ways that we structurally exclude these beings from development theory despite the massive impacts that development has on all living beings on Earth. The topic always tends to get a strong reaction, and I push it pretty hard to see what students in the group will do. On one occasion, during the closing minutes of the tutorial, one student who had engaged critically and eagerly across the rest of the semester burst forth with a strong emotional reaction, revealing that their parents were, respectively, an owner of a beef cattle farm and a leader of a lab conducting animal testing. The student was confronted and hurt by the implications of our discussion. We were able to talk through the reaction in the short time left, and I was able to follow up with the student to make sure they felt heard and knew that I would take their views into account when refining the course for future years. That experience showed me the importance of leading with context and positionality when introducing students to critical political economy.

Valuing and evaluating critical theory

Power cuts in different ways. Many of our students occupy positions of relative structural power beyond the university. This can lead to some students refusing the terms of critical discussion, for example falling back on appeals to 'human nature' as an explanation for the ongoing exploitation and destruction of ecosystems – a denial of complicity in domination (Plumwood 2002). For other students, taking on the critical view can lead to them feeling completely disempowered by the degree to which injustice is structurally embedded in our economies and societies and the lack of direct agency they have to 'fix' this. Addressing these sorts of complexities requires reflexivity in teaching, as the following vignette demonstrates.

Madelaine: While teaching a third-year undergraduate subject on Environmental Justice, I realised that the students, although engaged with the theoretical material, had a very high level of anxiety about the 'value' of their humanities/social science degree in the current job market. After some weeks of teaching them about critical environmental justice theory, decolonial and feminist critiques, they were depressed and unsure of what to do with this information and tools of critique. In response, I re-adjusted the lectures and tutorial activities to highlight ways that these frameworks had been included (to varying degrees of success) by policymakers, activists, or frontline communities; and to continuously highlight projects where social science insights were essential to their functioning. For example, a colleague came to the class to talk about the way that they used environmental justice theories to guide a project on solar panel expansion in Vanuatu. On another occasion, I had a guest lecturer come from the Environmental Defender's Office to talk about her work and career trajectory.

What I had to navigate was the tension of critique – a basis for political economy – with the need to maintain hope: and to show ways in which often abstract theories can be applied to the workplace/workplace skills. It is a delicate balance. Political economy sometimes feels like a discipline that is losing funding and institutional support, yet it also seems to be increasingly popular with students. There is an evident appetite for locating contemporary issues like the climate crisis and the impact of AI data centres within a systemic analysis of global capitalism and how power works.

As teachers, we are tasked with evaluating students' grasp of the theory we are teaching and how this plays out in terms of encouraging their ongoing engagement with the tools. We have noted three basic factors at play here. First, there is the difficulty of teaching to the right 'level' in classes filled with interdisciplinary student backgrounds (should we go high? teach to the middle?). Second, there are the difficulties arising when some of the students have never or only rarely encountered *theory* beyond the scientific mode of inquiry. Third, there is the generic difficulty of navigating these questions when marking in our discipline is seen as 'fuzzy' – and we mark hard.

Fundamentally, theory is hard! Getting to grips with this reality, and learning that critical reasoning is not black and white, can trouble students used to clear-cut answers. For political economic issues, there will rarely be a 'perfect' answer, but there can be a well-argued and justified one. Making a compelling argument rather than preparing a chain of deductive logic raises the crunchy questions of the interface between science and the social sciences. This provides a challenge to us in how we teach, but also in guiding students on what we are evaluating when we grade their work. The difficulties of building this bridge with students often shows up in tensions around marking. Students regularly provide feedback about how much harder we seem to mark their work than they are used to, and this evidently affects their perception of our discipline and the student evaluations we get.

Fundamental to some of the above is that training in political economy is a training in critical thinking, a skill that is not always as central to other disciplines. We have both noticed big differences between students who are explicitly learning Political Economy (at USyd and Kassel) and the students with much more diverse backgrounds and training in our current departments.

Madelaine: This is probably not unique to our subjects, but a particular challenge when teaching some of the few humanities subjects that STEM/Law students may take is the difference in marking and what this then means for our own evaluations as ECRs. It is rare for students to get high HDs (marks in the 90s), yet for students in STEM where there is a right or wrong answer these sorts of grades are more common and, at least anecdotally, more so with the rise of AI. As such, when a student who is used to getting HDs elsewhere takes one of our subjects, expecting it to be a 'bludge' subject due to it being a social science/humanities elective, we

get a lot of push back if they get a mere Credit grade. The lower grade may be because of the different skills required but also may be because of the tradition of harsher grading in our field. This can bring students' WAM scores down and, in turn, feed into poor student evaluations for us teachers, leading perhaps to smaller enrolments, with adverse implications for teachers' job security.

Anna: I have reasonably frequent requests for guidance from students – typically those from beyond Geography (*e.g.* from Economics or Law) – who are used to consistently high grades but not getting them in my class. They tend to be seeking guidance on what exactly they need to do to get back to HD territory and, from this posture, demonstrate more and less willingness to instead focus on how to become more elastic in their thinking generally. Some of my best student evaluations have come from these interactions, where students take up the challenge to engage in a new way, but this is certainly not always the case. Students can be surprised to be brought back to critical social science when discussing human-environment relationships and economic geography, and when this proves to be difficult intellectual fodder breakthroughs really depend on the students' willingness to engage. I'm hardly the first to note that with the new waves of AI-enabled 'learning' and crisis-ridden prospects for students' futures, some make the call that it is simply not worth it to push past the discomfort and into generative intellectual space.

Opening pedagogical space and generative frictions

The ongoing dismantling of higher education within advanced capitalist economies continues to limit our capacities to perform critical research and teaching within universities (Brown 2011). We are certainly relatively lucky in our current roles, relative to many other aspiring academics who have not been able to find good working conditions. Acknowledging the opportunities afforded us by the positions we hold, we want to reflect on how the dispersal of trained political economists across diverse disciplinary contexts may allow for political economy to take on new guises and questions, rather than being isolated and starved of resourcing.

Our first contention is that there is value to the frictions of diverse institutional homes for political economy as a discipline. These may allow further strengthening of our explanatory hand, showing that political economy is able to grapple with many challenges, although we do need

experts in other subjects to parse things, such as ecological cycles and biological processes. Fellow researchers and students can bring their own knowledge and questions to projects and classrooms, which enriches the application of political economic analysis. In this way, we have potentially the best of both worlds – the capacity to engage with deep theoretical debates and questions of political strategy, but also the breadth and depth of knowledge that interdisciplinary perspectives, questions and interventions can offer.

Teaching the diversity of students in our courses has also been incredibly rewarding. We have a lot of power as lecturers to have influence on future workers 'beyond the echo chamber'. Indeed, our students often undergo radical shift that we rarely experienced with students of political economy. In our introductory lectures and seminars, we have opportunities to teach students what critical theory is, what it can do, and why it is necessary, not just for academic discussions, but for the diverse careers that our students will enter. This is a balancing act but also rewarding when it goes right.

We also become more skilled at translating ideas and making their value plain. It doesn't necessarily pay off to always be critical but having a constructively critical pedagogy matters. Our experiences of teaching in non-political economy courses and presenting in non-political economy environments has made us increasingly skilled in being able to distill our key interventions into understandable points and to go beyond the jargon of our discipline. We recurrently ask of our research: so what? Why does this matter?

Reflections on the future of political economy as a precarious ECR

Being a political economist outside a political economy department is rewarding and fruitful for our own research and teaching expertise. Yet it also raises larger questions about what our roles are, especially as precarious or recently precariously employed ECRs: how can we, within an increasingly fragile university environment, take up the challenges and opportunities of teaching into these spaces?

Teaching political economy means we are politically conscious and tend to be more politically active than early career academics in other fields: for those reasons, we have the potential to be singled out as troublemakers.

So, doing this type of research and teaching and having this profile does not usually pay off. It is also hard to place yourself in a research environment that is not so welcoming to critique. There is no Field of Research code for political economy in the ARC. In Germany, the historical home of political economy – and where Madelaine was based for 12 years – there was only one ongoing position advertised in 2024. This leads us to key questions that we have both been considering: when there is a shrinking space for political economy. Where do you find employment? How do you re-fashion your profile in a palatable way? And how do you build ongoing and fruitful collaborations across disciplinary boundaries?

As a final reflection, we wonder: would we move to a political economy department if we had the choice? We are both unsure about this and trying to untangle why that is so. In part, it is the reality of the job market: why hope for something that does not exist? Yet our reluctance is also because of what we enjoy about where we have landed; there is an openness to geography/environmental humanities and how these subjects bring attention back to people and places. There is a fantastic opportunity for grounded research and an openness to new methods, ideas and findings that is not always so apparent in political economy departments.

Anna Sturman is a Lecturer in Human Geography at the University of Sydney.

anna.sturman@sydney.edu.au

Madelaine Moore is a Lecturer in Environmental Humanities at UNSW.

madelaine.moore @unsw.edu.au

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