
Why We Need the Novel: Understanding World Politics Through Literature

RAYMOND TARAS

From kindergarten through high school, U.S. curricula have undergone significant changes in the last decades. The Common Core State Standards in English, adopted in forty-six states, calls for seniors in public high schools to read more informational texts and less fiction. Phasing out novels, including seminal works like Harriet Beecher Stowe's anti-slavery narrative *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, and replacing them with historical documents and nonfiction are seen as ways of updating pedagogy and equipping students with the skills required for today's labor market.

This supposedly pragmatic, but also philosophical, shift has a counterpart in higher education. The stated mission of the Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics Education Coalition (STEM-EC), a Washington-based organization of educators, business leaders, and technology employers, is to steer educators and students toward these subjects and away from the humanities and social sciences. Federal investment to spur new research in these fields is expected to increase in the future, particularly through the National Science Foundation (NSF). Within STEM fields, the distinction between basic and applied research produces differentiated funding: grants primarily target applied scientific research, exemplified by partnerships between universities and corporations. Furthermore, over the past twenty years the trend in the United States and in many parts

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of the world has been to fund research with commercial potential, as well as to promote the commercialization of new scientific discoveries produced by government funding.

By contrast, less funding is becoming available for basic “blue skies” research where real-world applications are not immediately obvious. In an article in a British journal on major recent discoveries in cardiology, Belinda Linden explained:

The term ‘blue skies’ research implies a freedom to carry out flexible, curiosity-driven research that leads to outcomes not envisaged at the outset. This research often challenges accepted thinking and introduces new fields of study. Science policy in the UK has given growing support for short-term goal-oriented scientific research projects, with pressure being applied on researchers to demonstrate the future application of their work. These policies carry the risk of restricting freedom, curbing research direction, and stifling rather than stimulating the creativity needed for scientific discovery.¹

Inevitably, whether in the United Kingdom, United States, or other post-industrial knowledge societies, academics and scientific researchers are pushed to become entrepreneurs. Thus, resisting this pressure comes from an unlikely quarter—the hard scientific field of cardiology—and it vindicates the creative activities pursued in the humanities and social sciences.

IS THERE ROOM FOR FICTION AND INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS?

The humanities and social science alike face challenges in the STEM-oriented era: debates as to whether Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* was an apologetic work or a condemnation of European imperialism lose salience because of the increasing appeal of “practical” research.

However, this trend extends beyond literature to funding for the study of mainstream political science. In May 2012, the House of Representatives passed a bill dismantling the thirty-year-old NSF political science program. In March 2013, the Senate eliminated the program’s \$11 million budget, which comprised less than 0.2 percent of NSF’s total annual budget. The Senate amendment ending political science funding was sponsored by Republican Tom Coburn who scornfully observed that “studies of presidential executive power and Americans’ attitudes toward the Senate filibuster hold little promise to save an American’s life from a threatening condition or to advance America’s competitiveness in the world.”² Only projects certified as “promoting national security or the economic interests of the United States” remained eligible for funding.³ Coburn claimed,

“theories on political behavior are best left to CNN, pollsters, pundits, historians, candidates, political parties, and the voters, rather than being funded out of taxpayers’ wallets.”⁴

It is crucial to place the battle over political science funding in a broader context. As Jeffrey Isaac argued in *Dissent*, “the move to defund political science is linked to a broader conservative political agenda targeting many aspects of science and the humanities, and rooted in a hostility toward intellectuals.”⁵ Anything that is not “a real science” is not worthy of government support, Coburn and his fellow Conservatives inveigh.

Recruiting fiction to the aid of international relations is not a paradigmatic shift, but rather an extension of an interdisciplinary strategy for parsing complex problems. The methodological rigor prized by political science can be blended with the open-

endedness characterizing literary studies. Because they are both under siege, we might expect humanities scholars to align with their colleagues in the social sciences, pushing back against seemingly technocratic, but in truth ideological, justifications for curricular and research shifts. The American Political Science Association noted after the NSF budget was cut in 2013 that “while political science research is most immediately affected, at risk is any and all research in any and all disciplines funded by the NSF.” With “all scientific research vulnerable

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to the whims of political pressure,” non-scientific activity, as is conducted in the humanities, was downgraded even further.⁶

These changes to educational, curricular, and research priorities may prove counterproductive and actually undermine U.S. national security and economic interests. The ability to acquire and apply cultural intelligence—recognized by the Pentagon as pivotal to military success in foreign countries—may be snuffed out by making STEM subjects the priority. This is a risky proposition—now, more than ever given the juggernaut STEM lobby, we need works of fiction more in order to understand world politics. Political science shares an interest with literature, not just in preventing ideological factors from determining the value of a discipline, but also in developing a multi-faceted cognitive understanding of the world.

THE ROLES OF FICTION IN POLITICAL SCIENCE RESEARCH

Aristotle was certain that poetry commanded more authority than the historical method. Poetry orders history in abstract ways, conveying deep truths rather than mere descriptive accounts, such as those of “informational texts.” The poet’s function is “to speak not of events which have occurred, but of the kind of events which *could* occur, and are possible by the standards of probability and necessity.”⁷ In this spirit, Lionel Trilling, a member of the mid-twentieth century New York Intellectuals, observed that literature is the human activity that takes “the fullest and most precise account of variousness, possibility, complexity, and difficulty.”⁸ Czech writer Milan Kundera spoke of literature as advancing the “wisdom of uncertainty,” even as he credited the novel for giving shape to the Western concept of individual freedom and for having dealt with the unconscious mind before Freud or the concept of class struggle before Marx.⁹

The truth-value of literature has been much debated. In *A Meditation on John Constable*, English poet Charles Tomlinson ends with the lines: “The artist lies/For the improvement of the truth. Believe him.” In this

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vein, Salman Rushdie once told me that novelists use words to tell the truth, but politicians rarely do. It would be oxymoronic to expect novelists to stick to the truth when writing their stories, instead of mixing true facts with invented ones. In this *mélange*, they narrate information applicable to

the material world of STEM exposing, for example, how human needs are changing.

If many novelists assert that a function of literature is to approach truth and acquire wisdom, they also make a liberal humanist assumption about the capacity of art to be a force for good. Therefore, the liberal internationalist school of international relations shares this normative affinity with world literature that dearly values intercultural encounters. For example, Jean Rhys’ 1966 postcolonial novel *Wide Sargasso Sea*—the impassioned story of a Creole woman and her English husband in the Caribbean—combines the themes of colonialism, power, race, sub-alternship, gender, and eroticism all in one multivariate frame, allowing the reader to draw parallels to non-fictional relationships and events.

Many writers of fiction have directly addressed the subject of politics, while still others have themselves engaged in political activity.¹⁰ In

Gunshots at the Fiesta: Literature and Politics in Latin America, Maarten van Delden and Yvon Grenier list numerous examples of prominent writers' views on the relationship between art and politics. Mexican poet Octavio Paz described political ideologies as "*una carcel de conceptos*," or "a prison of concepts." His compatriot Carlos Fuentes claimed that "politics is the public expression of private passions."

Fuentes' more conservative Peruvian counterpart, Mario Vargas Llosa, characterized literature as a form of permanent insurrection and added that great novels do not simply reflect nations, but invent them. Across the Andes, Argentine novelist Julio Cortázar was persuaded that a revolution in language would produce a revolution in the real world. But in many cases, it is not the politics in these works that have attracted readers; the novels draw readers when they are compelling works of the human imagination, introducing their political subjects as a part of their exploration.

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It follows that for political scientists to grasp historical truths through works of fiction, a novel cannot simply unpack historical events. A cautionary tale is presented in the essay "Europe has the Shape of my Brain" by Romanian novelist Mircea Cărtărescu. Cărtărescu skewered Western expectations of Eastern European writers who were advised after the 1989 democratic revolution: "Remain in your designated ghetto and write away on your typically southeastern European stories. Write about your *Securitate* and that dictator of yours, Ceaușescu, and his People's Palace. Put in something about the feral dogs, the street kids and the Gypsies. Proudly demonstrate what a brave dissident you were during the communist era."¹¹

A political manifesto masking as a literary work is not a reliable narrative because it lacks the aesthetic qualities that entangle and entrap the reader. It is the aesthetic qualities that draw the reader into the complex, conflicted reality in which history encounters multiple branching points along which it may travel. In *Arab Culture and the Novel: Genre, Identity and Agency in Egyptian Fiction*, Muhammed Siddiq defined the novel as an imagined arena of contested realms, doubling as an agent of cultural change by intervening in political discourses and interrogating conventional views of intercultural relations. Novels chart subterranean cultural and political

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at overcoming an adversary rather than unearthing absolute truths. This fundamental difference in logic is reason enough to combine the heuristic strengths of fiction and politics.

PERSUASION AS APPLIED TO FICTION

According to the psychology of persuasion, fiction—much like print, digital, and broadcasting sources—has the power to alter our view of the world, even if such fiction contains false or invented information. Moreover, this school of psychology has found that a sleeper effect latent of fictional narrative may change readers' long-term beliefs. For instance, Markus Appel and Tobias Richter used the metaphor of transportation to capture how readers undertake a mental journey into a fictional world. Readers travel via representations that are pregnant with perceptual, spatial, temporal, and emotional information similar to those of perceived events. At the same time, they carry out little reflective or elaborative processing: "Mechanisms that allow for a critical evaluation of text information are partially neutralized, opening the door for persuasive effects." In other words, the fictional world temporarily alters a reader's frame of reference.¹²

The authors stated that "this mental journey from the real to the imagined world of the narrative critically affects emotional as well as cognitive processes," whereby developing emotional reactions similar to those in real-world events.¹³ These reactions are not only strong, but also persistent. Readers may find it difficult to counter fictional texts with personal experiences. Their cue-discounting—or lack of credibility in the fictional source—waned over time as well. As a result, "fictional narratives can have a persistent implicit influence on the way we view the world, and these effects may last longer than the effects of typical explicit attempts to change beliefs by presenting claims and arguments."¹⁴ Thus, applied fiction—used for purposes of persuasion—can be a force for good. However, it can be destructive too, as was illustrated during the Cold War, when both political blocs employed fiction for propaganda purposes.

A CULTURAL TURN IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

The last publications of Samuel Huntington illustrate that a cultural turn has recently taken place in international relations. Both the relations between states and the aesthetic representations of these relations have become legitimate part of international relations subject matter. Justifying the importance of this turn, Ned Lebow claims
in *Forbidden Fruit: Counterfactuals and International Relations* that “history tends to reduce uncertainty, while fiction, for which uncertainty is often essential, tries to expand it.”¹⁵

World literature provides a wealth of information about the cultures, pathways, and values of different societies. Literature can convey not only the importance of history-making contingent events—those that need not to have happened yet—but also the zeitgeist of an era.

World literature provides a wealth of information about the cultures, pathways, and values of different societies. Literature can convey not only the importance of history-making contingent events—those that need not to have happened yet—but also the *zeitgeist* of an era. Literature sheds light on the validity of the contact hypothesis—the belief that interactions with other societies typically bridge cultural differences and foster mutual understanding—that informs many foreign policy decisions. A survey of world literature would produce a more mixed and nuanced view. A sampling of recent works of fiction would show their value for to the study of international politics.

The Transformation of China

For example, take *The Vagrants*, a *roman à clef* published in 2009 by Yiyun Li. The narrative is set in an obscure town in China in the late 1970s, a decade after the Cultural Revolution and a decade before the Tiananmen Square massacre. Published within a clear political subtext, the work is essentially about the coalescing of the Democracy Wall Movement in Beijing. Yet the story is set in a provincial town and describes the political turmoil that follows the public denouncement, and then execution, of a young former Red Guard woman converted from militant to counter-revolutionary. The banality of everyday small town life serves as counterpoint to rumors of political liberalization about to be promoted by Deng Xiaoping in Beijing.

Through this imagination-driven narrative, the reader senses the tumultuous transformations about to sweep China and the international consequences those transformations will bring. Critics have recognized the contemporary relevance of Yiyun Li's novels. Reviewing her novel *A Thousand Years of Good Prayers*, one English critic wrote: "In the future, historians will look back on China's first steps towards superpower status as the most important economic transformation since the Industrial Revolution. For what those changes mean to ordinary Chinese people right now, they will read Yiyun Li's stories."¹⁶ Though Yiyun moved from Beijing to the United States in 1996 and her books have not been published in China, her retrospective accounts of political ferment before Deng are quite persuasive.

The Path of International Security

Those who adhere to the Realist School of international relations may find too much social constructivism in Yiyun's novels; they may thus prefer to turn to British novelist Gerald Seymour. Like Graham Greene and John Le Carré before him, Seymour meticulously documents conflict between national security agencies and constructs subtle plot- and character-driven spy thrillers. As an international television reporter, Seymour was in Derry during the Bloody Sunday shootings and in Munich when terrorists killed eleven members of the Israeli athletic delegation at the 1972 Olympic Games. Like Greene and Le Carré, Seymour has earned the praise of literary critics as one of England's best living writers.

Seymour has written over twenty novels, but his two post-September 11 works shine particularly bright. In *The Unknown Soldier*, a British-born al-Qaeda mastermind released from Guantánamo Bay crosses the vastness of the desert—the Empty Quarter of Saudi Arabia—in a caravan of Bedouins, camels, and terrorists. Hot on his trail, American technicians chase him with Predator drones that they operate from a base near the Yemeni border—remarkably close to the actual location of the remote, secret U.S. drone base that appeared in satellite images first published by the media in February 2013. Fiction may not just be stranger than reality; it can actually help create it.

Seymour's prescience also surfaces in *A Deniable Death*, first published in 2011. It ostensibly deals with a past event—how a makeshift homemade

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born al-Qaeda mastermind released from Guantánamo Bay crosses the vastness of the desert—the Empty Quarter of Saudi Arabia—in a caravan of Bedouins, camels, and terrorists. Hot on his trail, American technicians chase him with Predator drones that

weapon subverted the U.S. occupation of Iraq. “The improvised explosive device is the weapon that has snatched victory from the coalition and replaced it with the very imitation of defeat,”¹⁷ Seymour writes. The United States would spend \$30 billion between 2008 and 2009, “on all aspects of research to negate the effectiveness of these devices, from scanners to detectors, and into the world of vehicles that can survive an attack.” But to “beat our strategy of putting a convoy inside an electronic counter-measures bubble,” the enemy employed passive infrared and telemetry modules, car-key zappers, household alarms, and components from a cheap wrist-watch—all of which could be bought in an Iraqi souk for fewer than ten dollars.¹⁸

In Seymour’s view, the international system is not bipolarized. He describes the worldview of the hardcore Israeli intelligence agent in *A Deniable Death* this way: “He did not demean his enemy: he spoke of him with dislike but not contempt, vilified his cruelty, admired his commitment and gave respect.”¹⁹ In *The Unknown Soldier*, both the Iranian improvised explosive device (IED) mastermind assembling nano-parts into lethal weapons in the marshes at the confluence of the Euphrates and Tigris rivers, and the fugitive al-Qaeda operative seeking momentary pockets of safety in the scorching Saudi desert do not represent evil incarnate, but rather exemplify the complexity of the human character. Moreover, if the latter novel anticipated growing U.S. dependence on the drone in counterintelligence and counterinsurgency operations—and the moral questions raised by them—*A Deniable Death* intentionally sets out to identify the many obstacles that any future land-based invasion of Iran would confront. Thus, Seymour’s works furnish texts, if not at least inspiration, for an upper-level discussion in international security.

Application to Europe’s North-South Divide

In keeping with this vein of fiction illuminating international relations, can contemporary fiction also provide us with intelligence about alternative European futures and persuade us that one of them is more plausible than the others? Is there an emerging European literature of crisis reflecting a continental divide, and even a sense of broader Western decline? Can the novel serve as an early-warning system if it merely echoes political elites’ discourse on crisis?

This may be a high demand to make of fiction. However, etiologies of Europe’s crisis are too important to leave to political economists. Making sense of Europe’s North-South divide will require attention not

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just to differing economic structures, but also to mutual perceptions and self-representations.

A research project I undertake examines the literature of crisis implicating Europe's North-South divide. It reviews how fictional accounts address the sources and symptoms of malaise.

It could suggest that Europe's international standing is a function not just of economic performance, but also of will to overcome this crisis. It is not just culture that matters; fiction matters too.

CONCLUSION

As with most causal inferences, establishing a definitive connection between 1) the decline of fiction in our course curricula, 2) a flawed understanding of the cultural contexts of countries where we stake out claims, and 3) poor foreign policy choices, is impossible to do. But linking these three phenomena is a valuable thought experiment that can be relevant to policy and may even allow for modeling and application. After all, scientific discoveries are regularly the products of serendipity—they are not just products of a fixation on causality that purportedly shapes research in STEM subjects. Exploring these linkages in the way I have proposed can prove rigorous and fruitful.

Apart from utilitarian considerations, fiction can be an effective way to protect our intellectual freedom—a value in itself—as we experience ever-new forms of mind control that Aldous Huxley forecasted in his 1932 masterpiece *Brave New World*. Aristotle was aware of the subversive nature of art when he asked how a ruler could trust an artist if she or he has the ability to create something new. Novels can indeed be subversive, but also usefully illuminative. In short, fiction may be a political scientist's best friend. ■

ENDNOTES

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- 3 Daniel W. Drezner, "Why Political Science Can Drive Political Scientists to Drink," *Foreign Policy*, March 21, 2013, http://drezner.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2013/03/21/why_political_science_can_drive_political_scientists_to_drink.
- 4 Daniel W. Drezner, "Tom Coburn Picks on Political Science," *Foreign Policy*, October 7, 2009, http://drezner.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2009/10/07/tom_coburn_picks_on_political_science.
- 5 Jeffrey C. Isaac, "Public Inquiry and Democracy: Should the National Science Foundation Fund Political Science Research?" *Dissent*, March 28, 2013, <http://www.dissentmagazine.org/blog/public-inquiry-and-democracy-should-the-national-science-foundation-fund-political-science-research>.
- 6 Drezner, "Why Political Science Can Drive Political Scientists to Drink."
- 7 Stephen Halliwell, *The Poetics of Aristotle: Translation and Commentary* (Durham, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1987): 40.
- 8 Lionel Trilling, *The Liberal Imagination* (New York: New York Review Books Classics, 2008): xxi.
- 9 Milan Kundera, *The Art of the Novel* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2003): 32.
- 10 This is a separate issue that is not considered here. If it were to be discussed, examples would include: Ernest Hemingway and George Orwell's ideological engagement in the Spanish Civil War; Louis Aragon's visit to, and endorsement of, Stalin's Russia; Anna Akhmatova's sublime and persistent critique of that same regime; Arthur Miller being pursued by anti-communist Senator Joe McCarthy in the United States; Pablo Neruda's support of the left and Mario Vargas Llosa's of the right in South America; and Arundhati Roy's indictments of India's political establishment. For a starting point for inquiry, see: Robert Boyers, *The Dictator's Dictation: The Politics of Novels and Novelists* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005).
- 11 Mircea Cărtărescu, "Europe has the Shape of my Brain," in Ursula Keller and Ilma Rakusa, eds., *Writing Europe: What is European about the Literatures of Europe?* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2004): 63.
- 12 Markus Appel and Tobias Richter, "Persuasive Effects of Fictional Narratives Increase Over Time," *Media Psychology*, Vol.10 (2007): 128.
- 13 Ibid, 117.
- 14 Ibid, 129.
- 15 Richard Ned Lebow, *Forbidden Fruit: Counterfactuals and International Relations* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010): 257.
- 16 Susanna Rustin, "Yiyun Li: A Life in Writing," *The Guardian*, April 13, 2012, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/culture/2012/apr/13/yiyun-li-life-writing-interview>.
- 17 Gerald Seymour, *A Deniable Death* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2011): 54.
- 18 Ibid, 55.
- 19 Ibid, 70.