Using popular culture to make sense of the 2011 antiauthoritarian popular revolts in the MENA region: Theory and practice of the use of graphic novels and comics in classrooms

El uso de la cultura popular para darle sentido a las revueltas populares contra el autoritarismo en Oriente Medio y el Norte de África: teoría y praxis del uso de la novela gráfica y el cómic en el aula

BEATRIZ TOMÉ-ALONSO
Universidad Nacional de Educación a Distancia (UNED)

MARÍA ÁNGELES ALAMINOS-HERVÁS
Universidad Loyola Andalucía

Abstract

This article reflects on the relevance of popular culture in teaching IR and political science. Specifically, we present an active learning activity which includes the collective discussion of two comic strips —"The battle of the packets" and "Sharia Japanese style" (*Tok Tok Anthology*, 2018)—. Our first aim was for students to learn about North African and specifically about the 2011 antiauthoritarian popular protests (or the so-called "Arab Spring") as well as the main factors that caused them. Beyond this acquisition of basic knowledge, the designed activity aimed to enable students to "make sense" of the fact by using social theory movements' key concepts. Finally, the activity was intended to encourage students to reflect on the impact of (mainstream and non-mainstream) representations in their learning process and to engage them with the region by promoting higher levels of empathy with local actors. Preliminary result show that students increased their knowledge about the region. While only one student (out of 14) was able to establish the causes of the 2011 regional event before the activity, almost all of them (13/14) were able to explain the factors behind the mobilizations after the activity took place. Moreover, many students referred specifically to concepts such us "window of opportunity", "example" or "cleavages" after the activity. Finally, during the post-activity

class discussions, students showed a higher sense of empathy and pointed out how relevant the comic was to better understand the actors working within the region.

Keywords: MENA region, collaborative learning, comics, graphic novels, popular culture material, active learning, international relations.

Resumen

Este artículo reflexiona sobre la relevancia de la cultura popular en la enseñanza de las relaciones internacionales y la ciencia política. Específicamente, presentamos una actividad de aprendizaje activo que incluye la discusión colectiva de dos tiras cómicas: "La batalla de los panfletos" y "Sharía a la japonesa" (*Antología Tok Tok*, 2018). Nuestro primer objetivo fue que los estudiantes aprendieran sobre el norte de África y, específicamente, sobre las protestas populares antiautoritarias de 2011 (conocidas como Primavera Árabe) y sus principales factores. Además de este objetivo referido a la adquisición de conocimiento básico, la actividad pretendía que los estudiantes *dieran sentido* a los hechos usando conceptos de la teoría de movimientos sociales. Finalmente, la actividad buscaba animar a los estudiantes a reflexionar sobre el impacto de las representaciones (mayoritarias y no mayoritarias) en su proceso de aprendizaje y atraer su interés hacia la región promoviendo mayores niveles de empatía con actores locales. Los resultados preliminares muestran que los estudiantes aumentan su conocimiento del norte de África. Mientras solo un estudiante entre catorce fue capaz de establecer las causas de las revueltas de 2011 antes de la actividad, después de la misma la mayoría (trece de catorce) pudieron desarrollar los factores explicativos de las movilizaciones. Además, la mayoría de los estudiantes se refería a cuestiones como "ventana de oportunidad", "ejemplo" o "clivajes". Finalmente, durante la discusión que se produjo en clase después de la actividad, los estudiantes mostraron mayor sentido de la empatía y señalaron cómo el cómic había sido relevante para entender mejor a los actores de la región.

Palabras clave: Oriente Medio, Norte de África, aprendizaje colaborativo, novela gráfica, cómic, cultura popular, aprendizaje activo, relaciones internacionales.

INTRODUCTION

Teaching Middle East and North African (MENA) politics and international relations can be particularly challenging, not only because it is a complex region but also because students often have negative attitudes towards it (Baylouny, 2009). Many students have previously held stereotypes and perceive the region as emotionally and culturally distant and uniform. As stated by Sørli *et al.*, "[r]eference is frequently made to 'Middle Eastern exceptionalism' —that is, that there is something unique about the Middle East that makes the region prone to conflict, autocracy, and economic misery" (2005: 152). Indeed, Western cultural (and often academic) products tend to reproduce Orientalist discourses on the region and portray the Muslim and/or Arab "Other" as violent and nonrational (Cardeira da Silva, 2016; Said, 1997, 2014; Algaba *et al.*, 2021). As summarized by Baylouny:

Middle East politics represents one of comparative politics' most challenging tasks. Students have difficulty viewing the conflict from the actors' point of view. They commonly place actors in a black box of irrationality or lack of intelligence, investigating their motivations no further. Students fail to comprehend why the parties do not just compromise and get on with the business of living and developing economically. The problem of identification with the actors is particularly acute in [the] student population (2009: 216).

In this context of "distorted beliefs" about the region (Díaz Sanz and Ferreiro Prado, 2021), the use of popular culture material can be a powerful tool to challenge stereotypes and to help students develop critical engagement with the region. Popular culture has the potential to make "think and imagine and see 'differently'" (Holland, 2012: 105). Many popular culture products allow the public to engage critically to complex social and political issues. There are many examples referred to the MENA region itself, such as Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis*, Ari Folman and David Polonsky's *Vals with Bashir,* and Joe Sacco's *Palestine*. These works not only incorporate endogenous voices and concerns but also the idea of *subjectivity* itself. As stated by Holland, "these narrative practices make possible oppositional reading of dominant geopolitical scripts" and allow the readers "to formulate distinct, counter-hegemonic readings of geopolitical events and outcomes" (*ibid.*: 108).

This article presents the impact of a pilot project of educational innovation designed to integrate graphic novel and comic material in the classroom. While there is a large literature on the use of films in a Political science/International relations classroom, there are not so many studies which analyze the impact of graphic novels and comics. As explained below, the advantages of this popular culture material are many. This is why we designed and developed a project of education innovation entitled "Learning with graphic novels: subjectivity, discourse and representation". The project has been implemented among third-year students of the Bachelor of International Relations at the University Loyola during the 2021-2022 academic year. Students were required to read and analyze two common comics to draw analytical conclusions and to reflect on the role of different actors involved in the antiauthoritarian revolts in the MENA region in 2011. Our first aim was to show how comics or graphic novels can be used to teach (and learn) international relations and political science topics, specifically the 2011 popular antiauthoritarian revolts (or the so-called Arab Spring). As stated by Juneau and Sucharov (2010: 172), "by pairing spare text with often powerful visual imagery, graphic novels offer a highly intimate look at real-world issues" and "like movies, graphic novels are sensory and immersive, but like books they require a degree of 'activeness' in the consumer's position".

Although the Middle East politics course was only offered in the second semester, we decided to implement the learning activity among third-year students enrolled in the African politics course (first semester). This fact allowed us to analyze how the project itself affected students without previous knowledge of the MENA region (since in the African politics course only Sub-Saharan countries are studies). We

designed a three-hours activity (one session) which was organized as follows. Since the students did not have previous references to the 2011 popular antiauthoritarian revolts in the MENA region, they received a short lecture (one hour) about the so-called Arab Spring and how the social movements theory could explain it. After a short break, students interacted in small groups (3-4 people) for 45 minutes and read the two short comics presented: "The battle of the packages" (by Andeel) and "Sharia Japanese style" (by Hicham Rahma and Mohammed Ismail Amine), both sketches published in the *Tok Tok Anthology* (2018)[1]. Finally, the two comic sketches were projected for the class, read and commented in common during the last hour of the activity.

The use of graphic novels/comics can help to advance two major learning goals. First, students learn about social mobilizations and the role of different actors and factors in the region. Furthermore, students are encouraged to reflect on the construction of knowledge and cultural exceptionalism of peripheral areas as well as the role played by actors who are usually out of the mainstream focus. As stated by Hansen, "[a] reason for bringing comics into IR draws on the capacity of comics to offer critique of established political discourses or bring into analytical focus those who are not represented if international relations are defined exclusively as intergovernmental" (2016: 582).

Active learning has some advantages. For example, some works highlight its effectiveness "with regard to increasing student performance and satisfaction, as well as helping them better assimilate theoretical knowledge" (Van Driel *et al.*, 2016; Bijsmans and Schakel, 2018, quoted by Suárez-Collado and Sierra, 2021: 3).

The article is organized as follows. First, we present a theoretical discussion of how both the use of graphic novels and comics and active learning methodologies can improve students' performance in the classroom. After presenting their advantages, we explain how we integrated popular cultural material and the collaborative learning method and how we designed the activity to be implemented. Finally, we discuss the main findings before presenting our conclusions.

GRAPHIC NOVELS AND ACTIVE LEARNING: WHY THIS PAIRING CAN WORK

Graphic novels: main advantages (… and a postcolonial approach)

As pointed out by Gibert (2015), the international relations and politics academia is increasingly aware of the relevance of popular culture to understand, explain and teach wider political phenomena. Popular culture can not only be used to observe, describe and analyse the "world-out-there", but it can also be seen as "a cultural narrative of the self" (Engert and Spencer, 2009). Fiction and nonfiction materials help us

---

1. The titles in French are "La Bataille des Paquets" and "Charia Japonaise" (titles trasnlated into English by the authors from the French version).

"to get a sense of the everyday connections between *the popular* and *the political*" and allow us to see "how IR myths become everyday myths —because they are circulated, received, and criticized in and through everyday popular forms" (Weber, 2005: 9).

As stated by some authors, graphic novels —like other popular cultural materials— are an easy and entertaining way to approach complex ideas, debates, and issues. As noted by Gibert (2016: 499), the "approachable and familiar dimension of popular culture and the opportunity it gives us to break away with the usual lecture and seminar discussions of academic readings' model" can be "very helpful". By creating an emotional link with the topic, students are more likely to better understand actors' rationales and motivations. In addition, it has been shown that the rational and emotional "halves of the brain" become involved in the learning process, which in turn makes "learning easier" (Engert and Spencer, 2009: 99). By connecting the "object of study" (the topic), the space where it is debated (the classroom) and the "subjects who study" (the students), graphic novel language makes it easier to understand IR concepts, actors and processes (Correa da Silva y Tomé-Alonso, 2021).

Another advantage of using graphic novels is that this material has the capacity to bring regional actors' personal experiences into the classroom. In Juneau and Sucharov's (2010) article, they reflect on the fact that "a narrative approach —meaning one that focuses on the experience of political actors in understanding and framing their actions— helps unpack the sometimes-elusive concept of identity" (*ibid.*: 173). By highlighting actors' experiences from a subjective and personal perspective, graphic novels focus on micropolitics rather than on intergovernmental relations and macropolitics. They open therefore a window to understand others' experiences and motivations, which in turn reminds students that they might experience similar life experiences. As stated by Stover, this can lead to a "greater sense of empathy with people far beyond the borders of a nation state" (2005: 208).

Finally, graphic novels can be considered "cultural artifacts" (Algeo, 2007: 133) that deserve greater reflection. By encouraging critical thinking about the importance of representation, the relation between representation and knowledge, and the politics of identity to understand global affairs (Campbell, 2013: 225), students are called on to seek out the underlying power and its real-life consequences (Tomé-Alonso y Ferreiro Prado, 2020). By presenting a personal narrative about often well-known events, graphic novels allow us to question what has been presented as the "absolute truth". As stated by Juneau and Sucharov, "working with the assumption that each collective actor under analysis has a certain version of events —stories that that group tells about itself and about the other— reminds students they too might enter the classroom with particular frames, biases, or assumptions, and that it is legitimate to acknowledge subjectivity […]" (2010: 173).

The emphasis on the narrative is congruent with a postcolonial teaching approach. Postcolonialism rejects the idea of neutrality. Rather, knowledge "is always situated and, therefore, political" (Díaz Sanz and Ferreiro Prado, 2021: 3) and "can never be formulated outside the influence of social and political context" (Kurki and Wight, 2013: 30). This perspective highlights the relation between knowledge and power. As stated by

Grovogui, mainstream narratives often claim "universal 'truths' about themselves and native peoples" which are "neither constitutively native knowledge nor based on native concerns" (2013: 250). Rather, the "facts" and "events" presented by institutional media and social scientists "reflect their own 'castes of mind'" (Dirks, 2011, cited by Grovogui, 2013: 250). Said put forward this idea in his seminal work *Orientalism*: as a "style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between "the Orient" and "the Occident" which has to be understood as "a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient" (1978: 2-3). Orientalism assumes "an unchanging Orient, absolutely different from the West" and describes "Oriental' ideas (Oriental despotism, Oriental splendor, cruelty, sensuality)" (*ibid*.: 96).

One of the main arguments of postcolonialism is "its challenge to establish modes of thinking" (Darby and Paolini, 1994: 373). From this critical approach, mainstream narratives, and their ways of homogenizing and essentializing, can be interrogated and different (and preferably endogenous) discourses and experiences can be included. Thus, postcolonialism allows to bring to the surface "the racialized, gendered, and class processes that underwrite global hierarchies" (Chowdhry and Nair, 2002: 1). From the postcolonial perspective, therefore, and effort is made to "to participate in the creation of 'truths', based on distinct modes of signification and forms of knowledge (or the manners of representations) that advance justice, peace, and political pluralism" (Grovogui, 2013: 248).

Popular cultural materials and innovative practices

Popular culture materials are integrated into the classroom to conduct active learning activities. As pointed out by some authors, active learning "promotes greater student learning than reading and lecture alone" (McCarthy, 2014: 401). While "standard classroom lectures may not capture the imagination of students new to the subject of international relations", role-playing simulations and the use of Twitter or popular culture material tend to more highly engage students (Newmann and Twigg, 2000: 835).

Among active learning activities, collaborative learning implies that "students interact and collaborate to construct their own knowledge […] while the professor has a less active role than in his or her conventional status" (Wolfe, 2012, quoted by Martínez-Cousinou *et al.,* 2021). In addition to being an interactive and creative method, "collaborative work offers students opportunities to take clearer charge of their projects as coproducers of knowledge" (Burcu, 2019: 143). "Working in groups to *construct* common knowledge requires each of the members in a group to perform successfully to achieve the required objectives that are expected from them, as the output of each participant's effort is an essential piece of the 'puzzle' that they seek to solve together" (Suárez-Collado and Sierra, 2021). This is why collaborative learning is stated to "improve the educational experience not only by fostering knowledge acquisition, but also because it helps students develop key supplementary such as interpersonal skills, team management, research and inquiry, conflict resolution, and communication and presentation skills" (Eshuis *et al.*, 2019, quoted in Suárez-Collado and Sierra, 2021: 5).

The combined use of comics/graphic novels and the collaborative learning method makes sense in the context of the postpositivist turn in political science and international relations. This postpositivist turn "has led educators to advocate for the value of allowing students to find their own truths through a rigorously developed analytic framework that gives them the tools to evaluate both, evidences received in the course and the impact of their own biases in how they process it" (Malet, 2015: 247). Drawing on analytical tools and theoretical reflections presented during lectures, the students can use the comic to construct their knowledge. In this way, they can "move from a theoretical and narrative discussion to a more specific empirical arena" (Tomé-Alonso and Ferreiro Prado, 2020), analyze a cultural product and reflect on narratives.

INTEGRATING GRAPHIC NOVELS INTO AN IR UNDERGRADUATE CLASSROOM

Having reflected on the pertinence of the use of comics/graphic novels and collaborative learning methods in the classroom, this section presents our teaching activity, the learning objectives of our innovative action using graphic material, objectives are measured.

Learning objectives

As stated by Ferreiro Prado (2020), active learning activities need to be carefully planned to be effective. What are the learning objectives we plan to meet? How can these learning objectives be explained? Are all these learning objectives equally relevant?

The first aim is that students learn about the North African (sub)region (since they are enrolled in an African politics course) and specifically about the antiauthoritarian popular protests that took place in 2011 (often known as the Arab Spring) as well as the main factors that caused them. Beyond this objective, referred to as the factual dimension (acquisition of basic knowledge), this session aims to enable students to "make sense" of the knowledge they are acquiring and to establish relations between basic elements (conceptual dimension of knowledge). According to Kratwohl, knowledge can be classified into different types, two of which are factual knowledge and conceptual knowledge (Kratwohl, 2002: 201-216, cited in Ferreiro Prado, 2020: 21). While factual knowledge "refers to the terminologies, specific details, and basic elements within any domain", conceptual knowledge "includes (1) knowing information classification and categorization, (2) knowing principles and generalizations, and (3) knowing theories, models, and structures" (Tapia, 2018). We want students to know what happened in 2011 and afterwards but also to be able to establish connections between, for example, the presence of different cleavages within MENA societies.

In addition to these two main objectives, the planned activity is a great opportunity to encourage students to reflect about their own learning process. We intend to deconstruct the stereotyped visions of the region. While recent academic literature tends to highlight the role that political, social and economic factors play in the region and its development, students are still prone to use simplistic explanations when referring to MENA affairs. In this sense, our objective is to replace culturalist arguments (which emphasize the role of culture and religion when making sense of complex phenomena) with theoretically informed ones (which are widely used to explain similar phenomena in different regional contexts). This is why we use the social movement theory toolbox to explain protest dynamics in 2011.

Finally, our objective is to engage students with the region. Religion and cultural MENA particularities are often presented as foreign to Western societies. By avoiding these culturalist explanations, we intend to create a greater connection with the region among students. As pointed out by Juneau and Sucharov, "focusing on narratives can help students to set aside questions of right and wrong —debates that can easily create a brittle classroom atmosphere— and instead focus on the explanatory questions essential to understanding how world politics unfold" (2010: 173). By emphasizing the construction of the knowledge based on images and theoretical explanations, we want to overcome monolithic, essentialist and moral explanations and to focus on political processes. As explained by Mills, "these processes come to have power through their spatiality, through the ways in which identities become territorialized, in the linking between state power, boundaries, and ethnically grounded definitions of nations, or through the ways in which local citizens interact in daily life" (2012: 783).

Case selection and method

The 3-hour activity is part of an educational innovation project entitled "Using graphic novels in the classroom", which was implemented among students of the Bachelor of International Relations program at University Loyola during the first semester of the 2021-2022 academic year. The participants were students enrolled in the third-year African politics course. Although 17 students were initially enrolled in the course, 14 were present in the classroom the day the activity took place. While presenting a single case experience may be restrictive to generalize conclusions, it nonetheless allows us to identify some trends.

At this point, it is useful to note that the students were not familiar with critical international relations approaches or with regional issues. This was for the majority not only their first academic contact with postcolonial arguments and with MENA questions but also the first time they used graphic material in the classroom. They were, however, used to participating in active learning activities, such as role-play simulations. The novelty of the activity has at least two main advantages. It allowed the students to break from their daily routine. Also, since it was the first time they learned about the region, it allowed us to better assess the impact of the activity.

To evaluate the activity, the students were asked to answer a pre-activity question-naire and a post-activity questionnaire. After the activity, a debriefing session took place so they could expose their impressions and opinions about how it was, its main advantages and what to change or improve in the future. The fact that the group was relatively small allowed for a more in-depth discussion.

TABLE 1.
POSTACTIVITY QUESTIONNAIRE

Try to answer the following questions (remember that it is not an evaluable activity)	
Why did the 2011 antiauthoritarian revolts take place? What were the main causes?	
Who were the main actors that participated in the revolts?	
How can we explain the international influence on the revolts?	
For the following questions say if you: Strongly Disagree (0) Moderately Disagree (1) Slightly Disagree (2) Slightly Agree (3) Moderately Agree (4) Strongly Agree (5)	
To explain North Africa, religious issues are the most relevant ones	
To explain North Africa, cultural issues are the most relevant ones	
To explain North Africa, political issues are the most relevant ones.	
To explain North Africa, social issues are the most relevant ones	
North African societies are homogeneous	
North Africa is a nondynamic region	
North African societies are completely different from our societies	
I am interested in North African politics and international relations	
For the following questions say if you: Strongly Disagree (0) Moderately Disagree (1) Slightly Disagree (2) Slightly Agree (3) Moderately Agree (4) Strongly Agree (5)	
The comic has helped me to see questions from a different perspective.	The comic has helped me to see questions from a different perspective.
The comic has helped me to understand social movement theory.	The comic has helped me to understand social movement theory.
The comic has helped me to better understand the narrative subjectivity.	The comic has helped me to better understand the narrative subjectivity.
To explain North Africa, social issues are the most relevant ones.	To explain North Africa, social issues are the most relevant ones.
I liked the activity.	I liked the activity.

Source: Own elaboration.

The activity

When designing the activity, there are some questions that need to be addressed: How can popular cultural material be integrated? When should it be integrated? How many comics or graphic novel sketches should be included? How can we link theoretical explanation, collaborative learning and the use of comics in a unique activity?

As stated, the first step was to choose how to integrate the material in the classroom. There were two possibilities. The first was to introduce the students directly to the proposed material. The idea is to allow students to put together their own analysis and to share their conclusions in the classroom (Gibert, 2016). This can be defined as a type of *inductive* collaborative learning activity. The second possibility was to read and discuss the graphic novel or comic material after the lecture. This can be a sort of *deductive* collaborative activity. We opted for this second option for two main reasons. First, we have the conviction that active learning activities are more useful when combined with lectures. Second, since it was the first time students were invited to read graphic novels in the classroom, we thought they might need some training and tutoring during the process. As stated by Grayson *et al.*, "as lectures it is important to provide students with skills that help them to see —as well as read— politics, so that they can appreciate the visual text and will possess the tools for considered analysis of it" (2009: 160). Thus, after attending the theoretical explanation in the classroom, the students were asked to form small groups (of 3 or 4 people), to read the proposed comic together and to reflect on the following aspects:

(a) How does the comic reflect the elements explained by social movement theory (such as "window of opportunity", "alliances", "regime's response", etc)?
(b) How is the story told? What are the elements that are explicitly present in the drawing? What are the absent elements? Why? From which perspective is the story told?

What are the elements that attract their attention? Why? During the collaborative activity, the students can share their ideas, illustrated by examples from the comic to explain theoretical concepts and reflect on the narrative style. After their group reading, the students were asked to share (and explain) their conclusions in front of the others while the comic sketches are being projected in the classroom. Since the group was relatively small (14 students), we reread the comic together and used the opportunity to draw consensual conclusions. Our role during the activity was mainly to encourage students' participation and to call their attention to some issues mainly related to the comic itself (for example, how are the faces and their expressions drawn?).

The second decision was to choose the graphic novel or comic material. We opted to introduce Tok Tok into the classroom. Tok Tok is an Egyptian graphic novel anthology that collects shorter comics in the same book. We chose it for specific reasons. First, it is an endogenous product. Not only does it "talk" about Egypt, but

it is also created by Egyptians. Second, Tok Tok's first volume was published during the Egyptian revolution (January 2011), so it can be understood as a sort of diary on the Egyptian political revolution and its subsequent developments. Third, it does present short stories that are easy to read in the classroom and that do not require much effort from students. We chose two concrete comics: "The battle of the packages" (on the role of the army in the revolution of January 25, 2011, and its relationship with the protesters) and "Sharia Japanese style" (on the application of the sharia and the secular Islamist division in Egypt; it is also a parody of those who want to apply the sharia). Although we considered including other comics or graphic novels, we finally decided to integrate only these Tok Tok comic strips. On the one hand, Egypt is a central country not only in the region but also in terms of the developments of the so-called Arab Spring. Although it is a geographically North African country, it geopolitically integrates the two sub-MENA areas, Southwest Asia and North Africa. Additionally, we did not want to overload the students with many readings. Rather, we preferred to give them enough time to carefully read the proposed material (15 pages in total). As argued by Gibert, "[w]hat students are rarely aware of, and what […] we need to teach them, is that it takes some effort, and solid research and analytical skills, to make sense of popular culture material and draw political meaning from it. Rather than simply warning students against nonacademic sources, it may be more realistic and useful to invite them to think about how to best read and use them" (2016: 3).

To summarize, the activity unfolds as follows. The first part of the 3-hour seminar is where professors have a more active role. Drawing on social movements' theory, we explain the most relevant aspects of the so-called Arab Spring. We introduce classical concepts such as "political opportunity", "social alliances" and "regime's survival strategies". We also explain the role of international actors and international influences and how these can be theoretically analyzed. In the second part, we present the two comics, explain their relevance and introduce the proposed activity. We give some time for students to form groups and discuss the formulated questions. Finally, the different groups present their main conclusions. While projecting the comics for the whole classroom, we reread it all together, highlighting their main conclusions and some other aspects not mentioned.

HOW HAS THE PLANNED ACTIVITY WORKED? AN EXPLORATORY ASSESSMENT

As explained, to assess the impact of the activity, the students were asked to complete a questionnaire and to attend a debriefing session where they could express their impressions on the comic and how it contributed (or not) to their learning process. In general, students reacted positively to the activity. The formal student feedback questionnaire, which gathered a total of 14 answers, achieved a score of 4.2/5. Most students liked the activity and found it useful to their learning process.

The qualitative feedback pointed in the same direction. Students highlighted the fact that the comic helped them revise their stereotypes and connect with the region in a different way.

The written questionnaire allowed us to assess both the acquisition of factual and conceptual knowledge and issues related to the perception of the region. First, factual knowledge, which refers to basic knowledge about regional events and facts, considerably increased. After the session, not only were all the students able to answer the question "What happened in the region in 2011?" but also almost all of them were able to point out at least two causes of it. Some of them gave a complete answer to the question "Do you know why the 2011 revolts happened?":

— "The riots were the result of various economic, social and political factors. Civil society took to the streets to demand social justice and dignity".
— "Due to multiple factors. They started from social protests, which united Islamists and secularists, who called for social justice and dignity".

Before the session, 10 students (of 14) referred to the so-called Arab Spring when asked about the events that happened in 2011, and only one was able to say the causes of it.

Table 2.
Factual knowledge

	Before the session	After the session
What happened in the region in 2011?	10/14	14/14
What were the main causes of it?	1/14	13/14

Source: Own elaboration.

The students also increased their conceptual knowledge related to the region. There were no references to social cleavages or the international factor in the questionnaire prior to the activity. After the session, 13 students referred specifically to the union of Islamists and secularists during the 2011 protests, despite their deep differences. Most of them were also capable of establishing the relevance of the international factor as a "window of opportunity", "example" or the role of third countries in the region.

Table 3.
Relational knowledge

	Before the session	After the session
Role of cleavages in the region	1/14	13/14
Role of international factors	0/14	13/14

Source: Own elaboration.

Multicausal explanations

While in the first questionnaire students showed a complete lack of knowledge of the region, many later said that religious or cultural factors were relevant to explain the region. When asked to evaluate on a scale their agreement with the affirmation "[i]n order to explain the region, religious factors are more important than other factors", 9 of 14 (9/14) students responded with "agree" and 3/14 with "strongly agree". The same trend can be identified regarding cultural factors. Half of the students "agree" and 6/14 "strongly agree" with the sentence "[i]n order to explain the region, cultural factors are more important than other factors". On the other hand, the trend is not so marked when referring to political and social factors. Six students "strongly agree" and five "agree" with the affirmation "[i]n order to explain the region, political factors are more important than other factors". Seven students "strongly agree" and four "agree" with the affirmation "[i]n order to explain the region, social factors are more important than other factors".

Although after the session explanations linked to religion and culture do not completely disappear, they become less prevalent. Before the activity, no student indicated any value below "agree slightly" when referred to the affirmation(s) "[i]n order to explain the region, religious/cultural factors are more important than other factors". When asked to reply to the same question after the session, some students "strongly" or "moderately" disagree with the same affirmation. Although some preconceptions persist, we can speak of a changing trend.

The results are consistent with the content of the comic and with the professor's short lecture. Although the comic deals to a certain extent with issues related to Islam, it does so from a satiric point of view and presents religion as a factor of divergence rather than as a factor of homogenization. Also, social movement theory tends to highlight the role of actors, context, action, ideology, and mobilization rather than religion itself as a main explanatory element.

How useful was the comic?

Students' feedback on the second part of the questionnaire, referred to as subjective opinions about their own learning process, was also positive. When asked to evaluate in a scale their agreement with the affirmation "[t]he comic has helped me to see problems from a different point of view", three of them "strongly agree", four "moderately agree" and six "slightly agree". These results are consistent with the insights of the qualitative discussion carried out at the end of the session. One student stated that: "I had never thought about the protests from this perspective, about how young people like us live there" (Male student, 20 years old). Another said: "Everything seemed very different to me. I had never seen it from the point of view of those who participate in the protests" (Female student, 21 years old).

These statements are consistent with the data obtained by the questionnaire. When asked to evaluate their agreement with the affirmation "I have nothing to do with the

youth of the region", four students, "strongly disagree", two "moderately disagree", and six "slightly disagree". This sense of empathy is also highlighted during the final discussion in the classroom. One student said: "One realizes that we are very much like them. I hadn't thought of it like that before" (Male, 21 years old).

Ultimately, students responded positively to the challenge of subjectivity. When asked to evaluate on a scale their agreement with the affirmation "[t]he comic allowed me to better understand the subjectivity inherent to every narrative", six "strongly agree", two "moderately disagree", and two "slightly disagree".

During post-activity class discussions, students tended to emphasize how relevant the comic was to better understand the actors *working* within the Arab region. According to some of them, the comic was key to *see* what Egyptian youth thought, felt and did. When explaining this (intended) result, students were not referring to the previous lecture, although some of the were using theoretical concepts introduced by the professor.

Class discussion and other issues

Questions related to narratives and subjectivities were at the center of the debriefing session. In general, students agreed with the fact that narratives are always subjective and "situated". As explained by one student: "I had never realized that the Truth does not exist. I mean, it does exist, but the story is always told from a particular perspective" (Female student, 23 years old). Another stated: "They always tell us the story according to Western criteria, but they are not the only criteria" (Male student, 23 years old).

Beyond questions related to identity, subjectivity, and narratives, other relevant issues emerged during the last discussion. Some students realized that some of the girls portrayed in the comics were not wearing a veil. Indeed, the main character of one of the comics has long black hair. The question of the Muslim headscarf lies at the core of the Orientalist approach. The representation of characters, especially women, is a "key form of Orientalism because the 'Oriental' is created as a contrast to the West" (Tomé-Alonso and Ferreiro Prado, 2020). Women wearing hijabs are often portrayed as "submissive" to male figures. Sometimes this image is generalized to every woman living in a Muslim majority country.

It was not our intention to delve into the debate on the veil and its possible (many) meanings but to highlight the plurality of female prototypes in the region. In this sense, the feedback was positive. As explained by one student, "I have realized that not all women wear a headscarf and also that women do things" (Female student, 22 years old).

Finally, one of the issues that captured the students' attention was the question of regime repression. According to their own explanations, students *imagined* that repression was total (rather than selective) and that there was no space for any form of coaptation, liberalization or renegotiation of spaces. When thinking about the region, students (did) tend to highlight the authoritarian, and violent "nature" of local

regimes. They did follow an Orientalist argument which does not only emphasizes an Oriental/Arab "despotic" political authority, but which also stablish a North-South division. This is not a minor question. As stated by Shapiro, "violent cartographies are thus constituted as an articulation of geographic imaginaries and antagonisms, based on models of identity–difference" (2009: 18). Since the Treaty of Westphalia (1648), a point at which the horizontal, geopolitical world of nation-states emerged as a more salient geographic imaginary than the theologically oriented vertical world (which was imaginatively structured as a separation between divine and secular space), maps of enmity have been framed by differences in geopolitical location, and (with notable exceptions) state leaders have supplanted religious authorities. Moreover, geopolitical location has since been a more significant identity marker than spiritual commitment" (id.). After the activity, students realized that spaces and authorities have nuances that deserve to be exposed.

CONCLUSIONS AND LOOKING FORWARD

The students' feedback supported our own perception of the activity. The material used allowed a more dynamic and collaborative session. The fact that comics have a playful nature engaged many students in the discussions. Furthermore, the use of the comic and the group discussion allowed students to strengthen the knowledge gained from the lecture and to develop new skills. The activity allowed the emergence of some debates brought by the students themselves. Some students, for example, noted that the main female character in the comic did not wear a veil. The answers of various students were congruent with the arguments exposed during the session: North African societies are not homogenous, and many women do not wear a veil. The fact that these "controversial issues" are brought and discussed in common and are not directly defined by the teachers can have "potential benefits" (Malet, 2015). As stated by Malet, "engaging students in controversial debates with their peers also teaches them that arguments are won by evidence and effective presentation", and it avoids the risk that students have "impressions of instructor bias", which "can also be accentuated if the professor is seen to have a personal or ideological stake in persuading students to adopt a particular viewpoint" (*ibid.*: 248).

The activity and the students' feedback are congruent with the postpositivist turn (*ibid.*: 247). However, there remain some challenges that need to be addressed. The first question to answer is related to the number of comics or popular culture material to be included in the classroom: Should there be many, or are one or two enough? As stated by Gibert, it may be "an issue specifically linked to using different (types of) documents for every class, making depth more difficult to achieve" (*ibid.*: 10). Indeed, all the proposed material must be connected to both the lecture and the discussion. While increasing the number of discussed comics may have some benefits, such as the introduction of a variety of themes and advanced training of students in critically reading and analyzing popular culture material, it also reduces the attractiveness and

novelty of the activity. Our contention is that three class sessions that integrate comics can be useful. It would allow the professor to observe the evolution of the students' thinking. It is also relevant to pay attention to the group size. A group of 14 students allowed a discussion to emerge and made it possible for most of them to participate.

Ultimately, postcolonial learning may be understood as a process. Orientalist narratives are part of everyday politics, and it is not easy to challenge them. They are common in mainstream media and among academic discourses. Although the results of the present teaching activity are not conclusive and need to be further tested in different groups, the introduction of graphic novel material and endogenous voices in the classroom may help to unveil stereotypical conceptions about the region and to understand the Arab scenario as a more nuanced one.

Although the innovation activity and project are pilots and their results need to be consolidated, the evaluation by the students is overall positive. In particular, it has been noted that the comic-based activity increased the knowledge about the 2011 popular antiauthoritarian revolts among the students. After the session, the students had less stereotypes about the MENA region.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

References

Algaba, Cristina, Beatriz Tomé-Alonso and Giulia Cimini. 2021. "Orientalism and the mass media: a study of the representation of Muslims in Southern European TV fiction. The case of Spanish prime-time TV series", in Marta Pérez-Escolar and José Manuel Noguera-Vivo (eds.), *Hate Speech and Polarization in Participatory Society*. Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge. Available at: https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003109891-18.

Algeo, Katie. 2007. "Teaching Cultural Geography with Bend It Like Beckham", *Journal of Geography*, 106: 133-143. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/00221340701632781.

Baylouny, Anne M. 2009. "Seeing Other Sides: Nongame Simulations and Alternative Perspectives of Middle East Conflict", *Journal of Political Science Education*, 5 (3): 214-232. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/15512160903035658.

Burcu, Oana. 2019. "Refocusing group work on collaborative learning and diversifying assessments in political science departments", *European Political Science*, 19 (1): 140-157. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1057/s41304-019-00212-6.

Campbell, David. 2013. "Poststructuralism", in Milja Kurki, Time Dunne and Steve Smith (eds.), *International Relations Theories: Discipline and Diversity*, 3rd ed. Oxford: Oxford University.

Cardeira Da Silva, María. 2016. "Southern Insights on the Orient and Western Orientalisms", *Revista de Estudios Internacionales Mediterráneos*, 21: 1-11. Available at: https://doi.org/10.15366/reim2016.21.001.

Chowdhry, Geeta and Sheila Nair. 2002. "Introduction: Power in a postcolonial world: race, gender, and class in international relations", in Geeta Chowdhry and Sheila Nair (eds.), *Power, Postcolonialism and International Relations*. London: Routledge. Available at: https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203166345.

Correa Da Silva, Waldimeiry y Beatriz Tomé-Alonso. 2021. "La docencia reflexiva de las RRII desde el cine: de la ficción a las bases teóricas", in Rosalba Mancinas-Chavez (coord.), *Universidad, innovación e investigación ante el horizonte 2030*. Sevilla: Egregius.

Darby, Phillip and A. J. Paolini. 1994. "Bridging International Relations and Postcolonialism", *Alternatives: Global, Local, Political*, 19 (3): 371-397. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1177/030437549401900304.

Díaz Sanz, Marina y Lucía Ferreiro Prado. 2021. "Orientalism is not my opinion: Decolonial teaching and the problem of credibility in IR courses with a MENA focus", *Politics*. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1177/02633957211009068.

Engert, Stefan and Alexander Spencer. 2009 "International Relations at the Films: Teaching and Learning about International Politics through Film", *Perspectives*, 17: 83-104.

Ferreiro Prado, Lucía. 2020. "El aprendizaje activo y experiencial: su aplicación a través de simulaciones", in Lucía Ferreiro Prado (ed.), *Metodologías activas en las aulas de Ciencia Política y Relaciones Internacionales. Simulaciones de procesos políticos en organizaciones internacionales y nacionales*. Valencia: Tirant Humanidades.

Gibert, María V. 2016. "Using Elements of Popular Culture to Teach Africa's International Relations", *Politics*, 36 (4): 495-507. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9256.12105.

Grayson, Kyle, Matt Davies and Simon Philpott. 2009. "Pop Goes IR? Researching the Popular Culture-World Politics Continuum", *Politics*, 29 (3): 155-163. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9256.2009.01351.x.

Grovogui, Siba N. 2013. "Postcolonialism", in Time Dunne, Milja Kurki and Steve Smith (eds.), *International Relations Theories: Discipline and Diversity*, 3rd ed. Oxford: Oxford University.

Hansen, Lene. 2016. "Reading comics for the field of International Relations: Theory, method and the Bosnian War", *European Journal of International Relations*, 23 (3): 581-608. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1177/1354066116656763.

Holland, Edward C. 2012. "'To Think and Imagine and See Differently': Popular Geopolitics, Graphic Narrative, and Joe Sacco's `Chechen War, Chechen Women'", *Geopolitics,* 17: 105-129. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/14650045.2011.573512.

Juneau, Thomas and Mira Sucharov. 2010. "Narratives in Pencil: Using Graphic Novels to Teach Israeli-Palestinian Relations", *International Studies Perspectives*, 11: 172-183. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1528-3585.2010.00400.x.

Kurki, Milja and Colin Wright. 2013. "International Relations and Social Science", in Milja Kurki, Time Dunne and Steve Smith (eds.), *International Relations Theories: Discipline and Diversity*, 3rd ed. Oxford: Oxford University.

Malet, David. 2015. "Teaching controversial topics", in John Ishiyama, William J. Miller and Eszter Simon (eds.), *Handbook on Teaching and Learning in Political Science and International Relations*. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing.

Martínez-Cousinou, Gloria, Alberto Álvarez-Sotomayor and Beatriz Tomé-Alonso. 2021. "Collaborative learning in politics: creating spaces for political socialization in the classroom", *European Political Science*, 20: 413-426. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1057/s41304-020-00281-y

McCarthy, Mary M. 2014. "The Role of Games and Simulations to Teach Abstract Concepts of Anarchy, Cooperation, and Conflict in World Politics", *Journal of Political Science Education*, 10 (4): 400-413. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/15512169.2014.947417.

Mills, Amy. 2012. "Critical Place Studies and Middle East Histories: Power, Politics, and Social Change", *History Compass*, 10 (10): 778-788. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1478-0542.2012.00870.x.

Newmann, William W. and Judyth Twigg. 2000. "Active Engagement of the Intro IR Student: A Simulation Approach", *PS: Political Science and Politics*, 33 (4): 835-842. Available at: https://doi.org/10.2307/420926.

Said, Edward. 1978. *Orientalism*. New York: Pantheon Books.

Said, Edward. 1997. *Covering Islam: How the Media and the Experts Determine How We See the Rest of the World*. New York: Random House.

Said, Edward. 2014. *Orientalism*. New York: Random House.

Shapiro, Michael J. 2009. *Cinematic Geopolitics*. New York: Routledge.

Sørli, Mirjam E., Nils P. Gleditsch and Havard Strand. 2005. "Why Is There So Much Conflict in the Middle East?", *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 49 (1): 141-165. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1177/0022002704270824.

Stover, William James. 2005. "Teaching and Learning Empathy: An Interactive, Online Diplomatic Simulation of Middle East Conflict", *Journal of Political Science Education*, 1 (2): 207-219. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/15512160590961801.

Suárez-Collado, Ángela and Javier Sierra. 2021. "What Are the Challenges to Peace? A Workshop on Conflict Analysis to Understand Middle East Politics", *International Studies Perspectives*. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1093/isp/ekab006.

Tapia, Joel. 2018. "4 Types of Knowledge", *Learning Strategist*. Available at; https://learningstrategist.org/2018/03/01/4-types-of-knowledge/.

Tomé-Alonso, Beatriz and Lucía Ferreiro Prado. 2020. "Mapping Orientalist Discourses: Using Waltz with Bashir in the Classroom", *International Studies Perspectives*, 21 (2): 154-171. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1093/isp/ekz009.

Weber, Cynthia. 2005. *International Relations Theory: A Critical Introduction*, 2nd ed. London: Routledge.

BEATRIZ TOMÉ-ALONSO
btome@poli.uned.es
Profesora en el Departamento de Ciencia Política y Administración de la Universidad Nacional a Distancia (UNED). Doctora por la Universidad Complutense de Madrid, su tesis recibió el premio extraordinario de doctorado de la UCM (2016). Su trabajo se centra en la conexión entre los terrenos doméstico e internacional en el Magreb, especialmente en Marruecos, la evolución de los partidos islamistas, la política exterior hacia el Norte de África y Oriente Medio y la reacción a esta de los actores domésticos. Ha sido investigadora invitada en centros de reconocido prestigio, como NIMAR (Universidad de Leiden, centro en Rqabat), el Centro de Oriente Medio de la Universidad de Oxford (MEC, Reino Unido) y el Centre Jacques Berque (CJB, Rabat). Ha publicado en revistas como *Contemporary Politics, The Journal of North African Studies* and *International Studies Perspectives.*

MARÍA ÁNGELES ALAMINOS-HERVÁS
maalaminos@uloyola.es
Doctora europea en Relaciones Internacionales por la Universidad Complutense de Madrid y en la actualidad es profesora en el Departamento de Estudios Internacionales de la Universidad Loyola Andalucía. Anteriormente ha trabajado como consultora para la Comisión Europea y para el Observatorio de África del Instituto de Estudios de Seguridad de la Unión Europea. Ha sido investigadora invitada en el Centre de recherches internationales (París), en la École des hautes études en sciences sociales (París), en la School of Oriental and African Studies (Londres) y en Sciences Po Burdeos, entre otros centros. Sus intereses de investigación incluyen la seguridad internacional, la economía política del desarrollo, las dinámicas de cambio institucional, la política africana (en particular África Oriental), Sudán y Sudán del Sur, y las relaciones de la Unión Europea con África Subsahariana.