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Defending liberal international business education: a critical perspectives framework

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper draws attention to historically circular and currently globally rising illiberalism and state-sanctioned intolerance that oppresses academic freedom and free speech, affecting the content and methods of international business (IB) education. This paper aims to propose a critical perspectives (CPs) framework and a set of actions directed at defending liberal IB education.

Design/methodology/approach – The authors draw on action-oriented examples of CP and specifically the idea of coexisting multiple approaches to problem-solving. Accordingly, the authors propose a spectrum with three parts for integrating CP into IB education and discuss specific actions to be taken across all the components of the IB curriculum (learning goals, content, teaching methods and assessment) in each part of the spectrum.

Findings – The depth and level of engaging with CP in IB education depend on the restrictions of the social, political, business and academic environment and the educator's personal capabilities and preference to engage with critical scholarship and radical critique. Considering external and internal constraints, IB educators may choose to design courses and programs by focusing on raising awareness and tolerance, facilitating evaluation and solution creation or leading restorative actions and fighting oppression.

Originality/value – The paper elaborates on how CP can be embedded in the IB curriculum, especially under conditions where scholars may fear sanctions or lack skills to oppose the institutionalized constraints. The framework invites for reconciliation, empowering IB education to rise above dogmatism, foster diverse ideas going beyond neoliberal formatting of IB education, secure academic freedom and defend against pressures for uniformity in thought, values and action.

Keywords Critical perspectives, International business, Curriculum, Illiberalism, Academic freedom, Higher education

Paper type Conceptual paper

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> "It's an escalation of a kind that is unheard of," said Joan Scott, a historian and member of the academic freedom committee of the American Association of University Professors. "Even during the McCarthy period in the United States, this was not done."
>
> – Trump demands unprecedented control at Columbia, alarming scholars and speech groups – Associated Press, 15 March 2025.

1. Introduction

Something has changed. Although dire warnings that higher education is in "crisis" have sounded since the 1940s (McCafferty, 2010), in the past decade, the threat has become greatly magnified (Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2018). We construe this threat as a global shift from liberal arts toward illiberalism and promotion of division, exclusion and suppression, apparent even in strong democracies. It is evident in bans imposed on teaching specific content and the curtailment of free expression in higher education institutions (French, 2025). The challenge originates both within and outside the academy, taking the form of state-sanctioned intolerance and ideologically driven constraints on academic freedom. By this we mean not merely politically motivated interventions in higher education by governments, but attacks on academic freedom tacitly approved by authority. These attacks are carried out by those who view the creation and dissemination of knowledge for the common good as a threat to their authority. They are becoming more frequent, more aggressive and more open, even in long-established democracies and countries with strong traditions of protecting freedom of speech. Whatever we call the political movement responsible for these intrusions, it is clear that academic freedoms and free speech are being rescinded, with a narrowing of what is possible in terms of research and teaching.

Although not the most immediately or radically impacted area of scholarship, international business (IB) finds itself particularly exposed among the business disciplines. As we see it, IB is concerned with how political forces and actors structure private economic exchange across borders, but it is also about how that exchange, and the entities engaged in it, stimulate and suppress political change in the world. Examples of relevant research-informed IB topics present in IB education include institutional differences among countries and their utilization in IB market and non-market strategy (Casnici and Gama, 2024; Rogmans and Abaza, 2019) or the development of a global mindset (Hasse, 2022) of (future) managers. Consequently, the rise of illiberalism is a problem IB scholars experience in multiple dimensions. Such "tightening" (Gelfand *et al.*, 2006) going on in formerly liberal political economies profoundly alters the international trade and investment landscape. Pervasive intolerance of anything not emblematic of (ultra)conservative norms gathers momentum with encouragement from multinational enterprises (MNEs), especially but not exclusively in the realm of "tech," that perceive private economic opportunity in the suppression of democracy. Here IB educators find themselves in a precarious position: social actors working, directly and indirectly, to obstruct the fulfilment of their professional duties are the same social actors whose motives and methods it is their duty to expose.

The rise of intolerance is a global phenomenon, and it is by no means limited in its impact to higher education. As academics, however, we find ourselves increasingly demonised for performing our duties with integrity. Academics and intellectuals have been subject to stigmatization in the past: examples like McCarthyism in Post-War America and China's Cultural Revolution cast their shadows over the pursuit of truth through art and science. However, since the 1980s, in the same period associated with the latest burst of globalization and driven by some of the same ideological forces, a different and more insidious form of warfare has been waged on academia and has been growing in strength. Over the last four

decades, a strong consensus has grown among educationalists that neoliberal ideology has driven a wedge between the idea and the reality of university education (Gray *et al*., 2021; MacFarlane, 2021). Academics are acutely conscious of the constraints on their research and teaching imposed by administrative overreach, ruthless efficiency measures, narrow industry partnerships and the growing precarity of academic work as tenure becomes increasingly rare (McCann *et al*., 2020; Oravec, 2019; Rintamäki and Alvesson, 2023; Smithers *et al*., 2023). These phenomena reflect the impact of neoliberal orthodoxy as it pervades the university governance domain (McCann *et al*., 2020; Smithers *et al*., 2023). In the last decade, however, these trends have become entwined with a political ideology that would appear to reject the liberal foundations of neoliberalism.

Therefore, in this paper, our focus is on how the disorienting surge toward illiberalism and the inhibition of academic expression threaten to undermine IB education. We argue that, in this environment of mounting intolerance, the retention of critical perspectives (CPs) in IB is of paramount importance because CPs embody dissent and provoke strong reaction from hegemonic actors whose instincts are anti-democratic, nationalist, protectionist, xenophobic and violent. By teaching learners to recognize the interdependencies between the social, political and business domains and oppose what is offensive and suppressive in their intersection, IB educators defend academic freedom and, as a consequence, promote responsible management practice in IB.

We join and advance advocacy for the inclusion of CP in the IB curriculum (Boussebaa, 2023b; Lyons and Tarc, 2022; Witte, 2010). Our contribution highlights the growing risk that illiberalism presents to academic engagement with IB and endorses CP as the most effective and unintrusive form of defense. The paper elaborates on *how* CP can be embedded in the IB curriculum, especially under the conditions of rising illiberalism and limited academic freedom. Under such conditions, some colleagues might prefer to eliminate provocative content or practice and seek to align with inhibiting forces for fear of sanction. In what follows, we show *how* educators in IB can weave CP into their teaching even in a suppressive environment, securing the possibility to practice the freedom of thought among academics and business graduates.

We propose a framework for engaging with CP in IB education that outlines different levels of depth and engagement with radical critique (Adler *et al*., 2007a, 2007b). This framework proposes independent coexisting choices to either foster awareness and understanding of alternative worldviews and conceptions of "otherness"; or practice normative critique of dominant capitalist models and traditional ways of performing IB; or seek more transformative engagements, such as reclaiming the value of Indigenous knowledge and ways of learning.

The framework is grounded in reconciliation rather than division, with the ambition of empowering IB education to rise above dogmatism. The "liberal arts" approach the framework aims to embody allows diverse ideas to thrive together, protects academic freedom and ably defends against rising pressures for uniformity in thought and action. It also addresses the critique that business schools promote a false universality, a one-set-of-values-driven education (Boussebaa, 2021). By using this approach, IB educators and education can enable socially engaged business leaders who are empathetic to (not just aware of) the antagonisms confronting different stakeholders, who know the value of both public and private goods and who create transformative solutions as responsible citizens of the global community. In this way, we suggest, IB education can fulfil the purpose of higher education in a broader sense, i.e. to prepare graduates for a vocation, inspire them for continuous learning and development and develop their citizenship – the ability to recognize their privilege of education as well as the powers and responsibilities that come with it (Chandra, 2017).

2. Increasing illiberalism and eroding academic freedom: the emergent context of international business education

The anxiety in academia is not imaginary. According to the Academic Freedom Index published by the Institute of Political Science at Friedrich-Alexander University and the University of Gothenburg's V-Dem Institute, 34 countries and territories have experienced a "meaningful decline" in academic freedom in the last decade (Kinzelbach *et al.*, 2025). Only eight countries exhibited an improvement: five of those still rank in the bottom 50% of indexed countries. The authors of the report find a correlation between the decline in academic freedom and the electoral success of anti-pluralist parties, which "lack commitment to i) the democratic process as the legal means of gaining and losing power; ii) the legitimacy of political opponents; iii) peaceful resolution of disagreements and rejection of political violence; and iv) unequivocal support for civil liberties of minorities" (Medzihorsky and Lindberg, 2024).

While all eyes are currently on the USA, the problem of decline in academic freedom is identified around the world. The trend is evident in, for example, Argentina, Austria, Bolivia, Brazil, Finland, GA, Germany, Israel, Lithuania, Mexico, Poland, Portugal and the UK – all countries still ranking in the top 50% of the Academic Freedom Index.

Incursions on academic freedom in jurisdictions where it has traditionally been respected, even protected in law, are arriving with startling rapidity. New headlines starkly communicate the jeopardy: from *The Guardian*, published on 20 March 2025: "French scientist denied US entry after phone messages critical of Trump found"; 10 April 2025, "White House may seek legally binding control over Columbia through consent decree"; and, less than a month later, in *The Intercept* "NYU Demands Law students Renounce Protests or Be Barred From Sitting Final Exams." The latter article reveals NYU engaged Latham and Watkins to investigate students, a law firm notorious for agreeing to perform *pro bono* work for the Trump administration in "apology" for providing legal services Trump found personally objectionable (Mitchell, 2025). These grave intrusions on academic freedom and freedom of expression go well beyond the cumulative academic frustrations with managerialism and dogmatic neoliberalism.

Again, however, this is not an exclusively American problem. Around the globe, academic inquiry is being squeezed by governments that treat campuses as another front in their political battles (AFI, 2025). Examples from overtly illiberal nations fall readily to hand. Brazil, for instance, can be called a country where academics have "freedom with a foot on the brake": constitutional protection exists, but day-to-day scholarly life is hedged by fear of budget reprisals, lawsuits or digital intimidation (Pells, 2018; Vieira, 2023). Furthermore, Argentina has experienced a marked and rapid decline following the election of President Javier Milei, as evidenced by the 2025 Academic Freedom Index (AFI) report, which records a drop in Argentina's AFI score from a high of 0.97 to just 0.69 within a single year – one of the most significant declines globally (AFI, 2025). This deterioration is closely linked to Milei's anti-pluralist, austerity-driven agenda, which has targeted public universities through drastic funding cuts exceeding 70% for higher education and the scientific-technological system (Wanschelbaum *et al.*, 2024).

Finally, we refer to New Zealand, ranked second in the world as a full democracy (Economist Intelligence Unit, 2024). New Zealand is a nation historically proud of the freedoms it accords academia, although its ranking at 61 in the Academic Freedom Index suggests this confidence may be misplaced. In December 2024, its government announced that humanities and social science research projects would no longer be eligible for grants from the country's largest public research fund. The move was justified on the ground that these fields do not generate commercially promising outcomes. Assessed on that basis, prominent scientists criticized it as counterproductive (Sarpong, 2025). Other commentators thought it no coincidence that the categories of research deemed ineligible for funding were those most likely

to discredit the policy of the government, a coalition of conservative, nationalist and libertarian parties (Baker, 2024). Three months later, New Zealand's Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Regulation, David Seymour, announced his intention to replace members of the Council of the University of Auckland, 65th in the QS World University Rankings. His reason was that the university had introduced a suite of compulsory courses intended to situate disciplinary knowledge within the context of Auckland and New Zealand's unique culture, geography and history. Prominent in these courses is an introduction to *tikanga Māori*, the lore governing life and interactions among the Indigenous people of New Zealand. "David Seymour said while there is 'an element of truth' that the University of Auckland is independent and can do what it wants, he intends to 'appoint better people' to the university council who he said have the 'ultimate say'" (*New Zealand Herald*, 2025).

Increasing strictures on university independence threaten academic freedom and distort educative content and communication. Our predecessors faced even greater impositions. Regrettably, the examples that come most readily to mind are the rise of illiberal regimes in formerly democratic and capitalist Germany and Italy prior to WWII, yet principles of inclusivity and tolerance eventually won out. Had the liberal powers not won the day – and only through the efforts of a totalitarian ally – the global political economic script would have been wholly rewritten. Thus, as we observe the present situation being increasingly oppressive on free speech and thought worldwide, the historical lessons do not recommend passivity and invite finding the path for navigating compliance and resistance. We suggest that incorporating CPs in higher education, and IB specifically, offers such a possibility.

3. Critical perspectives in the context of (international) business education

3.1 The case for critical perspectives in international business education

In understanding the vital role of CPs in IB education, we double back to the characteristics of anti-pluralist political parties enumerated in Medzihorsky and Lindberg (2024). To reiterate and restate, such parties are increasingly successful at the ballot box yet exhibit disregard for democratic process, the legitimacy of political opposition, resolution of disagreements by non-violent means and the civil liberties of minorities. CPs, as we go on to discuss, urge students to understand the interplay between the conduct of internationalized firms and these features of their political, legal and cultural task environments. They help students understand that a shift toward anti-pluralism can be a consequence, at least in part, of the way IB redistributes income and wealth. They reveal how political changes that heighten risks of human rights violations may serve the interests of MNEs, calling into question the permissibility of corporate participation in political affairs in home and host states and especially in international institutions.

In contemporary IB teaching, we make clear distinctions between different political-economic systems: market-based economies are distinguished from planned, an approving paragraph or two might be devoted to the emergence of a cohort of sovereign developing nations in the latter half of the 20th century. While reputable IB textbooks never present socialism as *inferior* to capitalism, the mere fact that they are devoted in their entirety to the reproduction of capitalist institutions makes plain on what "side" IB stands. This is not cause for condemnation, but we fault the standard approach to introductory IB for presenting history as commencing (excepting a short digression on the gold standard) with Bretton Woods during the dying days of WWII. The political economic systems common to the belligerents in that war go unexamined, as though it could hardly matter to IB. Yet, that war created the foundations for the institutional environment within which IB has gathered momentum, driven by the MNE, for almost eighty years. Power and political structures that

have recently been shaken still shape IB operations and therefore must be understood by IB graduates if they aim to make effective decisions going beyond the self-interest of the MNE.

Although it is not made explicit in our textbooks, much of what IB addresses embodies neoliberal economic theory, together with its underlying ontology and deontology, translated into principles and prescriptions for the private policy domain (Fotaki and Prasad, 2015; McCafferty, 2010; Roberts and Dörrenbächer, 2014). It is only fitting that the educative process prepares students for a world formatted according to neoliberal principles.

But, as current events make plain, we cannot teach IB pretending that powerful political actors, many closely aligned with, if not actually from, the IB community, are not relentlessly striving to reformat the world in ways deleterious to most of its inhabitants. Accordingly, CPs act as a counterbalance to the politically agnostic core of IB education, reminding students that public and private policies were not always tailored to neoliberalism and that adherence to its tenets can fade. For example, the recent electoral successes of right-wing populist parties are typically attributed to disenchantment with "globalism" (Dudar, 2024). This is sometimes construed as a rejection of neoliberal economic strategy, as open-door policies have generated self-perceived losers, many objectively worse-off and some only in their imaginations (e.g. casualties in the "War on Christmas"). If the world is undergoing a reformatting that displaces the political-economic centrality of markets, IB needs alternative principles and prescriptions. However, the deeper entanglement of neoliberal ideology with nationalist sentiment (Ban *et al.*, 2023; Scheiring, 2022) suggests IB more urgently needs CP to untangle the reconciliation of economic liberalism with the repudiation of internationalism.

From an IB standpoint, one of the most striking features of illiberal regimes is their protective attitude toward corporations deemed integral to or emblematic of national strength. These are typically, but not exclusively, MNEs. As Poruthiyil (2021) observes, these companies are the primary beneficiaries of the liberal internationalism whose inequalities ushered illiberal governments into power. Poruthiyil (2021) regards the discordant illiberal equilibrium between dismantling democratic institutions and protecting and promoting certain corporate interests as no less than a collusion between business and political elites. There may be economic advantages for IBs in this collusion, but the core theories we rely on in IB are not equipped to fully explain it. More troubling is the possibility that MNEs collude in authoritarian social transformation "even if the engagement makes no economic sense" (Poruthyil, 2021: 122). Should that be true, it is vitally important that CPs be brought to bear in the educational setting and any tool that facilitates this has value. Thus, in what follows, we elaborate on the concept of CP in the context of IB education and propose a framework showing how they can be woven into our curriculum.

3.2 Conceptualizing critical perspectives

The term "critical" is used in the context of various concepts, approaches and theories, and, therefore, to some IB educators, who are less familiar with the critical scholarship, the conceptualization of "critical perspectives" might be confusing. For example, the term "critical" is used to refer to *critical* thinking (Hannon *et al.*, 2004; Whatley and Dyck, 2000), *critical* management education (Perriton and Reynolds, 2018; Roberts and Dörrenbächer, 2012), or *critical* realism's onto-epistemological implications for education (Syed *et al.*, 2010). Several themes and theoretical approaches have been listed under the heading "critical perspectives" without directly using the term "critical." For instance, post-colonial considerations (Alcadipani *et al.*, 2012a, 2012b); the "dark side" of IB (e.g. greenwashing, modern slavery and tax evasion); various effects of IB operations on, for example, national development, state policies and various stakeholders; and financial disruptions and crises

have also been associated with the CP in IB (Dörrenbächer and Gammelgaard, 2016; Roberts and Dörrenbächer, 2012). It is therefore useful to add some clarity to the conceptualization of "critical perspectives" to allow better identification of how they might enrich the IB curriculum and help explain issues discussed in the previous sections.

CP can be defined as a radical critique grounded in skepticism toward dominant, largely colonial or neocolonial, social and political structures and ecologically destructive patterns (Adler *et al.*, 2007a, 2007b). Our understanding of CP is inspired by *critical management studies* – a scholarly community that engages with *radical critique* rather than critical thinking (Adler *et al.*, 2007a, 2007b) – the ability to question, analyze and evaluate different business scenarios, strategies and theories (Brookfield, 1987). In radical critique, the *radical* is concerned with the "socially divisive and ecologically destructive broader patterns and structures – such as capitalism, patriarchy, neo-imperialism and so forth – that condition local action and conventional wisdom" and *critique* is concerned with exposing the facts that nurture and sustain those "divisive and destructive patterns and structures" (Adler *et al.*, 2007a, 2007b). Radical critique is deemed necessary because beliefs, practices, patterns and structures are not inevitable but contingent and changeable in the search for justice, representation, equality and restoration of environmental balance in global and local communities.

CP, in critical management studies, are not limited to specific topics, theories, perspectives or educational methods (Adler *et al.*, 2007a, 2007b), and so are the CP in the context of IB, because CP in IB are strongly related to work performed in *Critical Management Studies* (Roberts and Dörrenbächer, 2012). In IB, CPs are interdisciplinary perspectives on various political, social, economic and environmental issues that arise in IB activities (Roberts and Dörrenbächer, 2012), and therefore critical IB scholarship engages with the radical critique of those issues. In CPs in IB, a number of topics (within and beyond critical management) have been identified and could be considered to be CPs (Dörrenbächer and Gammelgaard, 2019; Roberts and Dörrenbächer, 2012), however, radical critique more than a specific topic itself remains at the core of the critical IB scholarship. In other words, CP in IB elevate questions of social limitations, justice, power and other normative evaluations (Dörrenbächer and Gammelgaard, 2019). The main idea is that CP aims at questioning hegemony and opposing the acts in the IB context that are felt to be offensive and suppressive.

While CP does not have a unified theoretical foundation, a number of scholars and perspectives have strongly influenced or at least provoked the majority of the discussions within this field of studies. CP are inspired by thinkers like Marx, Gramsci, Foucault and other critics of the dominant version of capitalism (Adler *et al.*, 2007a, 2007b). Because of these theoretical associations, in the mainstream scholarship, CPs have been frequently perceived as "leftist," "red," "socialist" and "anti-business" views that have little to do with the market economy and "contemporary" views on economic growth. Such perceived negativity toward CP is likely to grow even further in the context of deglobalization and China–US decoupling (Witt, 2019; Witt *et al.*, 2023), in which confrontation of underlying political ideologies as well as the West versus anti-West debate is encoded. Moreover, even among critical scholars, sometimes, overwhelming negativity of critical arguments has been acknowledged (Adler *et al.*, 2007a, 2007b), which pushed mainstream scholars even further away from considering the potential value of CP for IB research and education.

As a result, until very recently, works on CP in IB have been rarely cited among mainstream IB studies (Dörrenbächer and Gammelgaard, 2019); IB scholars have engaged to a very limited extent with some major scholarly movements that seek to enhance global equality (Boussebaa, 2023); and CPs have been little considered in the mainstream IB curriculum (Kwok *et al.*,

2022), even if excellent critical textbooks and other materials, teaching practices and educational approaches have been made available (Adler *et al.*, 2007a, 2007b). Such a trend is likely to deepen even further under the rising illiberalism and political pressures on higher education, including IB, pressing for anti-criticality compliance even for critical scholars or those critical-curious.

To reduce the growing threat to diminish or even eliminate the liberal arts approach to IB education and practice, which is currently on the rise, we draw on the action-oriented examples of critical scholarship that, we believe, are likely to appeal to the IB educators even under the constraining conditions. For example, Gaudry and Lorenz (2018) and Woods *et al.* (2022) acknowledge the need for radical change to redeem global equality and justice but recognize that such change may come in stages with diverse perspectives and levels of awareness coexisting simultaneously. Inspired by their ideas, in the following section we elaborate on a spectrum with three parts to consider the value of CP in the IB curriculum as a way to defend academic freedom and free speech in IB education and a wider society.

3.3 Three-part spectrum to integrate critical perspective in international business education

Deep and wide engagement with radical critique (Adler *et al.*, 2007a, 2007b) may not be possible because of the existing and currently increasing illiberalism and eroding academic freedom, as we discussed in the previous sections, but also may not be preferred or possible because of the limited skillset, especially in cases when educators are not extensively trained in critical scholarship but are critical-curious. Abandoning various levels of engagement with radical critique under the institutional pressures or not developing curiosity toward critical scholarship in IB education will take away the power to defend against illiberalism, adequately respond to the arising pressures and limit scholarly opportunity to fulfil the purpose of higher education as noted in the previous sections. Recognizing these external and internal limitations, we draw on the frameworks that were designed to address similar considerations.

For example, the framework proposed by Gaudry and Lorenz (2018) identifies the existence of a three-part spectrum process in the Canadian universities' attempts to indigenize the academy and, therefore, research and teaching in the community: *Indigenous inclusion* – the policy aimed at bringing in Indigenous people in the academy yet without acknowledging their approaches to knowledge and learning, thus, without changing the dominant structures; *Reconciliation indigenization* – the policy that aims to open debates on how Indigenous and colonialist knowledge and ways of learning could live together, being appreciated on common grounds; and *Decolonial indigenization* – the policy that seeks restorative action, in which dominant structures are changed, giving the power and freedom to exercise Indigenous knowledge and ways of learning to the Indigenous people.

Inspired by a spectrum-based approach to Indigenization developed by Gaudry and Lorenz (2018), we propose a somewhat similar idea: a spectrum with three parts to integrate CP in the IB curriculum (see Figure 1). The depth and level of engagement with radical critique depend on the restrictions of the environment within which IB education is taking place as well as personal capabilities and preferences to engage with critical scholarship. We argue that such a spectrum-based framework is a solution that allows for the diversity of thought to thrive simultaneously under various degrees of illiberalism and existing limitations of academic freedom. Such an approach is also more inclusive to critical-curious scholars who can this way develop the needed skillset and, as a consequence, deepen their engagement with the content and methods that help promote tolerance of diverse approaches and free speech.

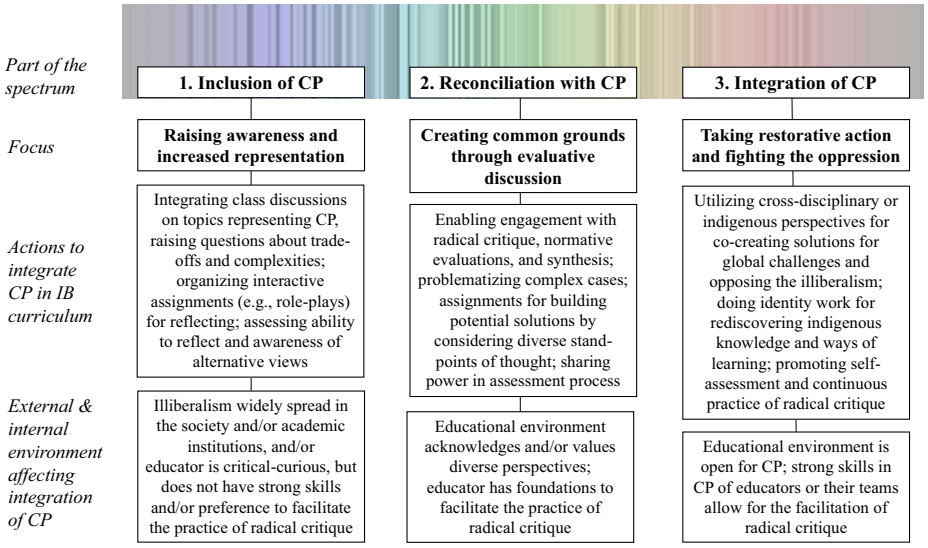

Figure 1. A three-part spectrum for integrating CP into the IB curriculum under different internal and external circumstances
Source: Authors' own elaboration

In the following parts, we discuss actions that can be taken at every part of the spectrum. These actions are directed at defending the liberal arts approach in IB education and therefore encouraging (future) business leaders to engage with positive social change during their studies and once they graduate regardless of potential pressures and limitations.

4. Actions to defend liberal international business education: a spectrum-based approach

To integrate CP into IB education in each part of the spectrum, there is a set of actions to be taken. These actions reside in four components of the curriculum – a comprehensive framework that defines what and how learners should learn about a specific subject. Thus, to ensure that actions for integrating CP in the IB curriculum are systematic, actions need to be taken in all four interrelated components of the curriculum, i.e. in *learning goals; content; teaching and learning methods; and assessment of education.* We start with a brief explanation of each of these components and the actions that have been taken in the IB education formatted according to neoliberal principles.

Setting *learning goals* in the curriculum provides foundations for all the subsequent decisions made by the educator. Therefore, learning goals largely define whether, for example, CP will be even considered in the program or the course. The results of the survey conducted by (Kwok *et al.*, 2022) indicate that learning goals in the IB curriculum are typically knowledge-focused (Kwok *et al.*, 2022). The major soft skills to be achieved through the goals of the IB curriculum traditionally have been the cross-cultural competencies (Aggarwal and Wu, 2021), global mindset (Hasse, 2022) and critical thinking (Brookfield, 1987).

The *content* in mainstream IB education has featured themes related to IB activities, international marketing, finance, or management and was primarily concerned with

successful internationalization or a firm's functional operations abroad (Kwok *et al.*, 2022). The knowledge an IB graduate should obtain has been relatively standardized through established IB textbooks, collections of teaching cases and various online resources (e.g. GlobalEdge).

Traditional *methods of teaching* used in IB have been "lectures 40%…, discussions 20%, written cases 18%, live cases 6%, computer simulations 4%, other types of simulations 2%, role play 3%, and consulting projects 7%" (Kwok *et al.*, 2022).

Assessment refers to "the systematic gathering of information for the purposes of making decisions or judgments about individuals" (Lynch, 2001). Learners should be assessed with items focusing on concepts relevant to their discipline using wholistic assessment (Lynch, 2001), and according to the previous choices made in the IB curriculum, assessment in IB has often been performed in a standardized and quantitative testing manner, checking the obtained knowledge of learners or through various types of reports.

Integrating CP in the IB curriculum requires a somewhat different set of actions, because CP aims to uplift the understanding that humanities, such as IB, often do not have clear-cut answers (Rear, 2019), and the goal of criticality is to problematize the phenomenon studied (Foucault, 2019). Curriculum design based on neoliberal thinking is more focused on the transfer of knowledge about effective managerial and business decisions rather than encouraging problematization and kaleidoscope-type reflections that deeply integrate social, political and business domains and even the opposition to what is offensive and suppressive in their intersection. However, given that the depth and level of engagement with CP in each part of the spectrum will be different because of the conditions discussed above, the four elements of the curriculum shall also be addressed differently in each part. We further delve deeper into each key part of the spectrum and actions within them.

4.1 Spectrum part 1: inclusion of critical perspective in the international business curriculum

Under the conditions of widespread political pressures, illiberalism institutionalized in the society and/or academic institutions or adopted by authority in other means, or when a critical or critical-curious scholar is teaching in the classroom where institutional (regulatory, normative, cognitive) pressures have created limited tolerance to alternative views, the defense of liberal arts in IB could focus on developing awareness and understanding about "otherness" and working on increasing tolerance for alternative views by including CP in regular educational activities, typically in a subtle manner.

Therefore, at the *Inclusion* of *CP* parts of the spectrum, the *learning goals* could be concerned with raising awareness and opening the discussions from diverse points of view. For example, these goals may uplift awareness and discussions about the complexity of IB issues, encouraging learners to not be satisfied with easy answers and to seek evaluative analysis from different points of views; ambiguity of decision-making; encouraging learners to tolerate uneasy and unclear situations; and introducing imperfection of IB knowledge by making learners aware that most of the decision/action that seem right and appropriate from one perspective are unacceptable or harmful from another, especially in the IB context when power relationships between management and employees; headquarters and foreign subsidiaries; and global and local perspectives carry strong imbalances of power.

As a result of such learning goals, IB educators are likely to select *content* that includes topics and materials that more closely relate to the regular IB study content: the dark side of IB (e.g. greenwashing, tax evasion, lobbying and political connections), various effects (on, e.g. country development, state policies and managing multiple stakeholders) of IB operations, or financial disruptions (e.g. financial crisis and corruption) (Dörrenbächer and

Gammelgaard, 2016; Roberts and Dörrenbächer, 2012) are likely to resonate with both educators and learners with the limited skills in radical critique and when the free voices are being openly suppressed. Materials offered for reflections and discussion can also be on the "border" between critical and acritical thinking. Such an approach allows engaging with new horizons by going beyond dominant ideas and perspectives but still relating to universalistic, neoliberal or imposed perspectives without an extensive threat for sanction.

Raising awareness about otherness and different perspectives could be done through slightly extending traditional *methods of teaching* IB. In the lectures, asking students to suggest alternative views, express critique and more openly question potential hidden interests, power structures, business actions, etc. is a good start. Realization of culturally and otherwise diverse perspectives to enhance empathy and inclusion could be achieved through role-plays and interview-type exercises aiming to explain the "otherness" (Sanyal and Neves, 2008) or meant to solve management challenges within MNEs (Šilenskytė, 2022). Group reflections and collective workshops are useful to introduce the complexity of solving sustainability issues (Elo *et al.*, 2022) and when exploring ethicality and the overall impact of digital competencies on societal well-being and on businesses (Castañeda and Villar-Onrubia, 2023). Such types of exercises permit "hiding" beyond imaginary identity or collective action in conditions where individual-level and open opposition may be risky or not acceptable.

CP in this part of the spectrum can also be "accidentally" encountered when learners are interacting with a specific environment or situation. For example, experiential learning, study abroad and field trips supported by critical interactions (e.g. questions and discussions on conflicting or sensitive issues in the location) would support the development of global awareness enhanced with criticality (Witte, 2010).

As with other parts of the curriculum, *assessment* is also likely to be framed by institutional pressures. Institutions often impose strict requirements for assessment design, including the need for assessments to be finalized well in advance and subject to external moderation. Moreover, accreditation bodies often reinforce standardization, which can restrict flexibility and limit the scope for participatory assessment practices. Therefore, educators need to remain creative when balancing institutional requirements with attempts to create learning experiences for engaging with radical critique.

Thus, in this part of the spectrum, balancing standard, often quantitative, and participatory, often qualitative, assessment approaches would be recommended. Even if the framing of the IB education in this part of the spectrum remains close to the neoliberal model, the assessment of learner ability to engage with CP should not be based on multiple-choice evaluations or other tests presuming one right answer but is better performed in a more qualitative manner (Lynch, 2001). This is because standardized tests leave little scope for problematization and contextuality, because they focus on a "one-fits-all" approach (Rear, 2019). Quantified tests can be used, however, for self-assessment and when following the development of specific learners' competences, such as the competences of inclusion (Šilenskytė, 2022) or responsible leadership (Muff *et al.*, 2020). Yet, these assessments should be followed by qualitative reflections (via open-ended questions and/or essay assignments) and plans for further development, even if the qualitative assessments are typically more time-consuming (Theodoulides, 2024). Assessments in this stage might include reflection papers, project-based assignments, or presentations that allow learners to demonstrate their ability to engage with and articulate issues falling under the CP. Critical reflection analysis (Theodoulides, 2024) is one example of a measurable (qualitative and quantitative, with several assessment points over time) assessment of the learners' ability to engage with topics falling under the CP.

If possible, the assessment in this stage could include multiple linked and staged assignments to evaluate skill development over time, and particularly the starting point of learners and their capacity to understand criticality. Setting the first assessment at the beginning of the course will help educators cross-check initial assumptions about learners' abilities to engage with CP. This first point of assessment could be followed by one or more at later points, developing on prior submissions. This allows for comparison and judgment on the progress of an individual learner. Feedback provided to the learner by educators and peers would also help learners develop their ability to engage further with CP. Evaluation rubrics should detail the step-by-step learning process as well as the development of diverse skills and knowledge over the course (Šilenskytė, 2022; Theodoulides, 2024).

4.2 Spectrum part 2: reconciliation with critical perspective in the international business curriculum

At the reconciliation part of the spectrum, the educational environment – along with the skills of both educators and learners – acknowledges and values diverse knowledge systems, perspectives and ways of learning and thinking. IB education in this part of the spectrum can foster the ability to consider these differences as coexisting and approach normative evaluations with greater openness, encouraging dialogue and the search for common ground.

The *learning goals* in these conditions not only promote awareness but also involve engagement with radical critique, normative evaluations and synthesis considering various voices and representations, temporality, context and questions of power (Grey, 2004). Creating awareness of CP (i.e. requesting learners to remember, understand, apply and analyze) is insufficient, because radical critique requires increased representation that starts with the *evaluation* (i.e. "judgments based on criteria and standards through checking and critiquing") and *synthesis* or *creation* (i.e. "putting elements together to form a coherent or functional whole; reorganizing elements into a new pattern or structure") that reside at the top of Bloom's taxonomy (Anderson and Krathwohl, 2001). Table 1 illustrates some of the learning goals for different IB discipline courses that are suitable at the *reconciliation with CP* part of the spectrum.

This way, institutions can preserve the core of the IB curriculum, based on valuable theoretical contributions that have guided international manager and MNE actions for decades. Yet, introduce the questions of values, powers, injustice, social biases and irregularities. As a result, (future) international managers would *become aware of* IB complexities and would develop skills to *evaluate* these dilemmas as well as *develop* accountable solutions. This way IB programs and courses could bring radical critique to the learners and prevent universality in thinking and politically imposed dogmas in education and, as a consequence, in managerial actions.

Problematization of traditional IB materials and ideas would be the mechanism enabling development of cognitive foundations for radical critique and the foundation of the ***content*** in the Reconciliation with CP part of the spectrum. For example, when teaching about the subsidiary-headquarter relationship or subsidiary management, educators may wish to demonstrate that devising a good MNE strategy, in terms of efficiency, capability fit and competitive impact, does not guarantee MNE success. Strategy adoption and implementation in MNE is complex and affected by various stakeholder interests arising from the institutional environment (Geppert *et al.*, 2003) and discourses within and outside of the MNE, some of which may be judgmental toward others (Šilenskytė *et al.*, 2022). Increasingly, "good" strategy is that which meets the least resistance from those whose goals conflict with traditional managerial motives and methods. A CEO's role in strategy or MNE management may also be viewed from political assessments, normative prisms and temporal developments, such as the era of digital media (Wright, 2023). Threats, such as

Table 1. The illustrative examples of the IB education learning goals incorporating CP at the reconciliation with CP part of the spectrum

Functional area	IB course in which CP could be incorporated	Learning goals that incorporate critical perspectives
Management	*Cross-cultural management* or *international management*	Students should be able to: • *recognize* biases imposed by the extensive use of culture classifications and *evaluate* their impact on various stakeholders • *reflect* on the ethical responsibilities of managers in fostering inclusive, equitable and pluralistic work environments across borders • *formulate* strategies that allow seeking cultural awareness beyond widely established stereotypes of culture
Marketing	*Export marketing* or *international business operation modes*	Students should: • *be aware of* potential ethical dilemmas when exporting *and* be able to *evaluate* trade-offs of decisions to be taken • be able to *identify* positive and negative spillover effects of firm's internationalization and *support* decisions with minimal negative impact in all contexts • *design* marketing approaches that engage with local knowledge and promote fair representation and cultural sensitivity
Finance	*International finance*	Students should: • *understand* causes of income inequality across international markets and be able to *suggest* firm- and institutional-level strategies that would help diminishing such inequalities • critically *assess* the influence of offshore finance, tax havens and debt structures on developing economies and *design* potential restorative actions
Strategy	*Global strategy* or *international strategic management*	Students should: • be able to *explain* manager and firms' responsibility in creating current global megatrends, including sustainability concerns, and *develop* circular business models that would reduce the negative impact of MNE operations in host and home countries • *develop* strategic approaches that *integrate* ethical foresight and participatory stakeholder governance across the value chain

Source(s): Authors' own elaboration

cyberbullying that is a recognized phenomenon at work (Madden and Loh, 2020), the widespread of populism through social media platforms, under-covered agendas, inequalities, discrimination and social threats brought by the adoption of advanced technologies in business (Šilenskytė, Žigienė, *et al.*, 2024) are likely to be engaging topics in this part of the spectrum.

From here, the introduction of various macro- and micro-political effects, their relational interactions within and outside MNEs in the process of organizational change (e.g. Geary and Aguzzoli, 2016), business–politics relationships (e.g. Witt, 2019) or the effects of history on contemporary challenges and perspectives within the MNE and its country units (e.g. Šilenskytė *et al.*, 2022), discussing that history is "made" and, therefore, has consequences, could be a potential way to slowly move beyond MNE-centric views.

Another way of widening the horizons of learners' thinking is problematizing complex cases addressed without normative evaluation in mainstream outlets. For instance, Mol (2023) discusses Danish MNE behavior in the context of the Russia–Ukraine war. The paper aims to provide "law-like" insights for MNE behavior, and the standard for MNE behavior is determined by reputational impact. This discussion could be elaborated in the classroom by asking learners to reflect on what else could constitute a test of *rightness* in respect of MNE strategy, what stakeholder impact the selected decisions have and why managerial decisions are imperfect in the context of this or any other international conflict. Such problematization of mainstream cases would develop learner ability to engage with radical critique within the dominating structures of contemporary IB and the business study environment.

Both content and *teaching methods* in this part of the spectrum should foster learners' ability to engage in radical critique, "link parts together to see opposites and other dimensions to avoid losing sight of the larger whole" (p. 26), and tap into underlying assumptions (Whatley and Dyck, 2000). The approaches that uplift social interaction and consider learning as social rather than an individual experience are regarded as particularly suitable for this purpose (Huber and Knights, 2022; Perriton and Reynolds, 2018; Witte, 2010).

As illustrated above when discussing the content, the case teaching method is likely to be highly suitable to investigate in depth the situations and problematize them by practicing radical critique, developing skeptical capacity and engaging in sensemaking (Rippin *et al.*, 2002). Case teaching can be used for engaging with CP when the educator is selecting a case on one of the topics that clearly fall under the CP, e.g. modern slavery (Nagar and Hurd, 2020) or one that represents complex sustainability issues (López Valladares and Romero Lora, 2024; Radhakrishnan *et al.*, 2024; Sinha and Schmitz, 2024), Indigenous perspectives or allows for engaging in identity work (Rašković and Nagar, 2024). The cases can be discussed through the set of questions or when following a specific form of inquiry. For example, Whatley and Dyck (2000) adopt a post-modernist deconstruction framework for case teaching, which includes considerations of contradictions, alternative interpretations and analysis of hierarchy of voices. Collins (2013) proposes a three-step identity-informed framework that helps illustrating concepts, questioning norms and creating space for diverse perspectives for integrating criticality.

Regardless of the selected teaching method applied in this part of the spectrum, educator's mindfulness that learners are developing their skillset in radical critique as well as ability to deal with complexities and exercise the opposition inherent to CP is vital. Learners are likely to be prone to receiving "right" answers at the end of class or the course, and problematization without providing a definite solution might be uncomfortable and may even seem unacceptable to some (Rippin *et al.*, 2002). To avoid a backlash from criticality because of the latter, educators could provide an established solution or answer but discuss any tradeoffs that it entails, reminding learners of the imperfectness of decisions we make.

Learners might need more time, too. Prior research noted that learning criticality and critical skills takes time and requires continuous efforts within and beyond formal education (Ennis, 1993). Particularly, when learners are learning about sensitive, emotional, or provocative issues, the time needs to be provided for feelings to settle and clarity of thought

to return (Šilenskytė, 2022). In the environment where illiberalism is diffusing or tolerance for otherness might be limited in the multicultural classroom because of the ongoing societal-level conflicts, consistency in practicing radical critique rather than the immediate or single-time achievement of learners daring to oppose or critique is extremely important.

In this regard, performing *assessment*, reflection assignments or open-ended questions, as well as multiple assessment formats are suitable to evaluate learner ability to engage with radical critique (Liu *et al.*, 2014). Learners should be widely introduced to the fact that the manifestation of power in educational contexts should be questioned and constantly modified, recognizing the context in which it takes place (Šilenskytė and Rašković, 2024) and openly acknowledge that assessment is the "most political of all educational processes" (Reynolds and Trehan, 2000). Assessment embodies power relations between institution and learner, but also power relations in student-to-student interactions.

In this endeavor, the participation of learners in developing assessment procedures, monitoring the educational process and evaluating academic work is seen as a way to rebalance traditional power dynamics. Proposals for more participatory and less hierarchical approaches to assessment are based on the premise that such involvement fosters critical engagement and mutual accountability between faculty and students. These approaches also acknowledge that no assessment system is flawless, regardless of the authority or institutional status of those designing it. Such a process of assessment would further enhance learners' ability to engage with radical critique as they would question the authority, i.e. educator, whose power and decisions earlier were taken for granted, and therefore become better equipped to question other types of authorities and imposed structures.

4.3 Spectrum part 3: integration of critical perspective in the international business curriculum

When the educators' preferences, skillset and environment allow creating a learning path for engaging with restorative actions, openly opposing political and other sorts of hegemonies or addressing grand challenges through radical innovation, IB educators could design educational settings for empowering fundamental transformations through the integration of CP in the IB curriculum.

Learning goals at the *Integration of CP* part of the spectrum should allow for deeply and widely engaging with radical critique and draw on actions to be taken when seeking to decolonize the IB curriculum. Taking inspiration from work by Woods *et al.* (2022), learning goals in this part could aim for reconstructing the indigenous ways of knowing and learning and making sense of the universalistic IB knowledge and learning methods when performing indigenous-perspective-driven evaluations. Learning to reflect on identity and its implications for learning and knowing when considering self, social relationships and the mode of teaching (Huber and Knights, 2022) would be another highly demanding but very suitable learning goal in the *Integration of CP* part.

At this part, learning goals and *content*, in essence, should capture questions such as: "How did we get here?" accepting that we might be somewhere else given an alternative configuration of power and interests, followed by "Where to now?" wondering what might be possible given the extant configuration. The learning goals that require such enquiries should encourage engaging with different influences and facts for building a comprehensive, multisided story; considering the oppressed and the powerful; and using participants' diversity for social-bias-savvy reflections. Therefore, in this part, learning goals and content could also consider engagement with a wider context than a single-discipline context; for instance, in addition to the analysis of IB contemporary practices, the course could set the aim to engage with social, political and economic history, analyzing how it informed IB practices and power structures that

are observed today, calling for the evaluation and creation of restorative actions where they are needed.

At the *Integration of CP* part, teaching content could also engage with topics infrequently featured in the IB curriculum, such as post-colonial perspectives (Alcadipani *et al.*, 2012a, 2012b), social justice and activism (Tallberg *et al.*, 2022), indigenous perspectives on various business practices (Woods *et al.*, 2022), modern slavery (Burmester, 2024; Stringer and Michailova, 2018) and similar. Tallberg *et al.* (2022) observe that "(m)any may find teaching social justice topics in the business school uncomfortable and emotionally demanding" (p. 56), and therefore activism-related topics, such as animal activism (ethical thinking on animal treatment within supply and distribution systems), are likely to be omitted. However, this and other social justice-related topics concerning human rights in IB activities show the negative sides of (international) entrepreneurship and reveal potential mistakes and misdeeds (Talmage and Gassert, 2020). They also convey the experiences of historically suppressed groups, such as Indigenous people, and explore the relationships between participation and value in global business (Salmon *et al.*, 2022).

By exposing learners to the potential negative impacts of IB practices, such as exploitation, inequality and environmental degradation, CPs foster ethical awareness and a sense of social responsibility (Alcadipani *et al.*, 2012a, 2012b). However, to make such learning and teaching feasible, the infusion of perspectives from creating cross-disciplinary, linguistically and otherwise diverse teacher teams would be welcomed (Witte, 2010).

At the *Integration of CP* part, learners have a degree of skill in radical critique; therefore, *teaching methods* may be based on, for example, bottom-up discovery of indigenous ways of learning and knowledge practices. Woods *et al.* (2022), through the example of decolonizing entrepreneurship curriculum, provides a detailed account of a pedagogical method that enables granting knowing and learning powers back to Indigenous people. This case example explains how the Māori community in New Zealand has been engaged in a multi-cycle educational experience through which they "rework entrepreneurship for a Māori world. They claim the right to rename, reframe and retheorize the disciplinary constructs developed with Western scholarship, but speak to practices that predate colonization." (p. 90). Another example is the bottom of the pyramid (BoP) entrepreneurship (Dalglish and Tonelli, 2015) from emerging markets, because BoP communities were often seen as passive consumers rather than active co-creators of value. Teaching BoP entrepreneurship represents a transformative intersection between inclusive economic development and decolonization, challenging traditional Western-centric paradigms of business and knowledge production. There is more research needed on how ethnically diverse IB classrooms could be engaged with similar learning methods to take restorative actions and develop connectivity that goes beyond comprehension of cultural traits.

Sharing of power in the process of *assessment* is not sufficient at the *Integration of CP* stage, because learning at this part of the spectrum is in the hands of learners, and they are actively drawing on their indigenous, relational, political, social and cultural meanings, myths, stories and frameworks of value (Woods *et al.*, 2022). In this part, the focus of assessment should be drawing on what knowledge means to learners, how it enriches and allows them to cherish their identity (Beech, 2006; Huber and Knights, 2022; Woods *et al.*, 2022). Moreover, learners should be further encouraged to perform self-assessment beyond the educational settings. Such an approach to assessment has the potential to support change within systems and structures that may constrain equitable practice. It can help equip learners with the skills needed to navigate complex political environments and respond to structural challenges they may encounter when conducting business, whether locally or globally. These may include navigating issues such as corruption, discrimination or other pressures that compromise ethical standards and human rights.

5. Conclusions

Recently, higher education institutions have been subject to tremendous external pressure to change of different kinds. At first, various supranational institutions, accreditation bodies and scholarly advocates pushed for designing business education that is capable of preparing graduates to handle the grand challenges (Sewchurran, 2022; Šilenskytė and Rašković, 2024; Sinkovics *et al.*, 2022). As a result, many higher education institutions have started to map their business curriculum against the United Nation's Sustainable Development Goals and search for educational practices that would support education guided by such goals (Azmat *et al.*, 2023; Elo *et al.*, 2022; Šilenskytė, Cordova, *et al.*, 2024).

However, now immense pressures come from the slow decay of neoliberalism into neofascism that poses an awkward challenge: how should IB educators respond to impositions and threats demanding the redaction of their syllabus in line with political ideologies in some of the long-standing democracies? While such circumstances have not been unprecedented in certain regions, the remaining advocacy for freedom and free speech globally is now at risk of extinction. We sense the unease this directness generates in an IB readership, even one with a predilection for criticism, but we need to keep pace with our colleagues in education policy (Carnut, 2021), critical education (Giroux, 2006), political geography (De Souza, 2020) and political science (Cox and Skidmore-Hess, 2022) by naming existing threats more directly and offering suggestions on how they can be addressed.

In this paper, we have sought to show how the inclusion of CP in IB education allows scholars to fulfil our professional responsibility to defend free academic expression and nurture graduates who are able to successfully perform their vocation but also who are responsible, open-minded citizens of the world. Inclusion of CP in IB at varying depths and levels of engagement better equips learners to recognize and defend against the growing illiberalism in IB and society. The actions we suggest allow turning back to the efforts of revising the IB curriculum with the purpose of addressing the grand challenges, striving toward more normative, ethics-oriented and accountability-savvy business education as called earlier (Ghoshal, 2005; Laasch *et al.*, 2022; Nagar and Hurd, 2020; Boussebaa, 2023; Heath *et al.*, 2019; Sinkovics *et al.*, 2022) instead of redacting the curriculum according to intolerant political and national ideologies.

Teaching with CP is the realization that power is grounded in unequal access to knowledge and that undeserved power is the most readily abused. Learning with CP "involves transforming how we understand our experiences of 'reality' to free ourselves to think differently" (Huber and Knights, 2022). Therefore, going beyond the IB curriculum framed within neoliberal principles and adopting different ways to engage with CP enables learners to problematize the "easy" truth and make "harder those acts which are now too easy" (Foucault, 2019) freeing learners from one set of thinking, values and actions potentially imposed by certain political and/or social actors or powers. It remains to be explored whether different parts of the spectrum free learners' minds stronger than the others, or create conditions for stronger resistance. Actions within each part of the spectrum are taken within different conditions, and, therefore, comparison of what impact it makes and on whom regarding resistance, defense and open-mindedness is not straightforward.

What is warranted, however, is that through engagement with CP in IB or other education, learners are equipped to continue on a path of self-development beyond their time in formal education, as it broadens their capacity to recognize stakeholders' and contextual influences in their working life (Šilenskytė, 2022; Tan, 2017). The mobilization of "critical reflexivity including ethics and critical thinking to reach moral and humanistic maturity" (Witte, 2010) provides a skillset for IB graduates to reflect and act, evaluating institutional and MNE activities and manager behavior by taking perspectives beyond nationalistic, ethnocentric or MNE-centric views. It enables their understanding of how social, political and business domains intersect, securing their

sense of agency to object to and change what they find oppressive in their home, host market of operations or globally.

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