

First Term, Academic Year 2024-2025

Field Seminar: International Relations

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Monday, 15:00-17:00

This seminar surveys the state-of-the-art in the field of international relations (IR) theory. It is based on two developments that concern the understanding of theory itself and its substantive content. First, IR, but the social sciences more generally, have become more self-aware of the fact that theorising takes place in different domains, such as meta-theory, ethics and normative theory, empirical theory both in the interpretivist and naturalist tradition, concept analysis and analytical frameworks, and political or ontological theorising. It also serves different purposes. While theory, in its instrumental purpose, can be the result of (empirical) knowledge, it can also be the very condition for the possibility of knowledge, as in the constitutive function of ‘analytical lenses’.

Second, recent decades have seen several substantive developments. IR dramatically widened its research fields beyond its classical concerns with war, diplomacy, and world order / global political economy (e.g. emotions, environment, big data). It draws on new meta-theoretical inspirations (e.g. new thinking on causality, uncertainty, relational and process ontologies, new materialism) and an engagement with different theoretical traditions (e.g. feminism, post-colonialism, non-Western IR).

As a result, IR has renewed its theories and theorising, as, for instance, in the study of international norms and institutions, (critical) security studies and foreign policy analysis, as well as in the burgeoning fields of International Political Economy (IPE), International Political Sociology (IPS), International Political Theory (IPT), and what has come to be called Global IR.

As it is impossible to cover the state of the art of our empirical knowledge in as vast a field within 10 weeks, the seminar focuses on our ways to establish knowledge, that is, on the different ways of building and using theory. These different research designs of theorisations are then illustrated or contextualised within some of the subfields (e.g. IPE, IPS, IPT) and/or research fields within IR (e.g. environment, security, IOs). Students are encouraged to reflect on how these different modes of theorisation come to understand, select and problematise challenges and opportunities of global politics in the 21st century. In the past, additional (and voluntary) ‘ad hoc seminars’ were organised to respond to particular interests of the participants.