

Pre-University Summer School: Politics



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Lecture

Understanding World Politics through Theories

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Learning Outcomes

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By the end of this session, you should be able to:

- **Identify** key international relations theories.
- **Explain** the importance of theories in understanding world politics.
- **Analyse** real-world political cases using theories.

Essential Reading:

Heywood, Andrew (2023) ***Global politics***. Third. London, UK: Bloomsbury Academic.

- Chapter 1: Introducing Global Politics pp.1-24
- Chapter 22: Whose Global Politics? pp.629-647

Baylis, John et al. (2023) ***The Globalisation of World Politics: An Introduction to International Relations***. Oxford University Press.

- Chapter 1: From international politics to world politics pp.5-18



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***PART I* Studying World Politics**



Why Theories?

“Theories help us to simplify a complex reality.”

-- Andrew Heywood in Global Politics (2023)

“Different theories allow us to see the same event in different ways – highlighting different causes and consequences.”

-- John Baylis in The Globalisation of World Politics (2023)



Why Theories?

Theories are:

- Theories are analytical tools
 - Explain why states behave the way they do, and how global structures influence outcomes
- The world is not self-explanatory – theories help us interpret the world
- Different theories offer different lenses

Theories help us:

- Make intelligent generalisations and assumptions about certain phenomena
- IR theories are about seeking to understand and simplify the happenings
- Tell us *whether* something is right, *what* is happening, *why* it is happening and *what* might happen to guide us based on assumptions
- To interpret the world based on how one sees the world



What is '*International Relations*'?

Definition of International Relations (IR)

IR is the study of how countries and other global players interact with each other.

***World Politics, Geopolitics, International Politics* = International Relations (IR)**

All fall into the realm of international relations.



What is 'International Relations'?

Definition of International Relations (IR)

IR is the study of how countries and other global players interact with each other.

States as Actors

- Sovereign nation-states that have defined borders, governments, and the legal authority to engage with other states.
- They develop foreign policies, negotiate treaties, and often serve as the primary units of analysis in IR.

Non-State Actors

- Entities that operate internationally but are not sovereign states. Examples include intergovernmental organisations (IGOs), non-governmental organisations (NGOs), multinational corporations (MNCs), and transnational advocacy networks.
- While they do not hold sovereignty, they influence global politics by shaping policy debates, providing services, and mobilising resources across borders.

Human Actors

- Individuals or groups, leadership, and actions affect international relations. This category covers leaders, diplomats, policymakers, and even ordinary citizens who participate in global networks.
- Their ideas, behaviours, and interactions can significantly impact both state and non-state dynamics in global politics.



Activity

Talk to your neighbour

Find one or two examples for each of type of actors:

- State actors
- Non-state actors
- Human actors

In your opinion, who are the main actors in international politics?



Key Actors in IR

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Main actors

- States (countries)
- Intergovernmental organisations (IGO) (like the UN) and non-governmental organisations (NGOs)
- Transnational Corporations (TNCs)
- Ethnic groups
- Individual leaders
- Each plays a different role in shaping world politics

Importance of diverse actors

- Explains that not only governments but also groups like environmental NGOs influence decisions.
- Shaping global policies (trade, int. law, humanitarian)
- Shaping and driving social and political change



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***PART II* Theories of International Relations**





What is Realism (Theory)?

Realism views world politics as a struggle for power

- Focuses on states as the main actor in an anarchic system

Assumes that states act based on self-interest

- States seek to maximise their security and power

Human nature can cause conflict

- Humans are naturally self-interested and conflict is inevitable

Believes that war and conflict are inevitable in global politics

- Cooperation is possible but limited by power dynamics

Views the international system as anarchic

- There is no global authority to regulate state behaviour, leading to power competition

Emphasises military capability as a key factor in state power

- States prioritise military strength to deter threats and maintain their sovereignty



Realism: assumptions and features

Core assumptions of realist IR theories

1. Statism:

The state is the primary actor in international politics.

2. Survival:

The main goal of states is to survive in an anarchic world.

3. Self-Help:

States cannot rely on others for security and must protect themselves.

Features:

- States are the main actors
- Anarchy
States are competing for power in zero sum terms – there is a finite quantity of power so an increase in one state's power means a decrease in another's.
- Power is both relational and relative (in comparison with another).
- Power for realists typically means military power, population size, and economic strength.





Liberalism

Liberalism...

- Believes international cooperation is possible and desirable
- Peace can be achieved through diplomacy, trade, and shared rules
- Humans and states are capable of progress and moral reasoning
- Liberalism values democracy, economic ties, and institutions
- Recognises that many global actors matter - not just states



Liberalism: assumptions and features

Core assumptions of Liberal IR theories

1. The international system is anarchic - but cooperation is still possible.
2. States are rational and self-interested actors.
3. Institutions help states cooperate and reduce conflict.
4. Absolute gains matter more than relative gains.
5. Interdependence reduces the likelihood of conflict.
6. Power is not only military - including institutions, norms, and soft power.

Features:

- States are important but not the only actors
- Anarchy exists, but cooperation is possible
- Interdependence reduces conflict
- Institutions matter
- Democracy promotes peace
- Power is not only military



Constructivism

What is constructivism?

- A theory that says reality in IR is socially constructed
 - IR is not just about power or money
 - It is about ideas and identities
- Ideas, norms, and values shape global politics
 - What leaders believe matters as much as tanks or trade

Constructivism:

Explains change (e.g. end of Cold War)

- Ideas and norms evolve

Recognises importance of identity and culture

- Not just “hard” power matters

Includes non-state actors

- Like activists, NGOs, and global movements

IR is not fixed, socially constructed

- politics is shaped by ideas, identities, norms, and social interactions



Constructivism: assumptions and features

Core assumptions of constructivist IR theories

1. Ideas, beliefs, and identities shape state behaviour
2. The international system is socially constructed
3. State interests are not fixed
4. Actors learn and change their identities and relationship
5. Power includes symbolic and discursive power

Features:

Norms matter

- Shared rules guide behavior (e.g. human rights)

Identities shape interests

- Who a country thinks it is shapes what it wants

Reality is built through social interaction

- Things like sovereignty, power, or even war are shaped by beliefs



Constructivism vs Other Theories

Realism: States care about power

- Assumes states are selfish and seek survival

Liberalism: States can cooperate using rules

- Focuses on institutions and mutual benefit

Constructivism: States act based on identity and norms

- Beliefs shape what states want and how they behave



Constructivism

Famous for saying: “*Anarchy is what states make of it*”

States choose how to behave, even in an ‘anarchic’ world

Focused on identity and inter-state relations

Different relationships = different behaviors



Three Cultures of Anarchy

Hobbesian: States are enemies

- Constant fear and self-help



Lockean: States are rivals

- Respect others' survival, but not always friendly

Kantian: States are friends

- Solve disputes peacefully and help each other





Discussion – Realism

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Questions

- A. How much power is enough?
- B. How much power is enough for security and survival?
- C. Do you think Realism accurately explains global politics today? Why or why not?
- D. Can states ever truly cooperate, or is conflict inevitable?



Discussion – Liberalism

Questions to reflect

- 1) Can all countries really cooperate equally?
- 2) Are institutions strong enough to prevent wars?
- 3) Should international organisations like the UN have more enforcement power?



Discussion – Constructivism

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Discuss

- A. Are identities and interests fixed?
- B. Who decides what's "right" or "normal" in global politics?
- C. Can ideas and norms really change global politics, or does power still decide everything in the end?



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***PART III* Critiqueing**



Discussion

- What is the (your) **critique** on realism (theory)?

Discuss with your neighbour (2 minutes)



Critique on Realism

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1. Overemphasis on conflict and power
2. Ignores domestic politics and internal factors
3. Underestimates the role of international law and institutions
4. Too pessimistic?
5. Neglects Non-State actors?



Discussion

- What is the (your) **critique** on liberalism (theory)?

Discuss with your neighbour (2 minutes)



Critique on Liberal IR theories

1. Too idealistic and optimistic
2. Ignores power and inequality that already exists in the system
3. Is it true that democracy brings peace?
4. Institutions can be weak or biased
5. Are liberal IR theories universal or based on certain values?



Discussion

- What is the (your) **critique** on constructivism (theory)?

Discuss with your neighbour (2 minutes)



Criticisms of Constructivism

Hard to measure beliefs and norms

- Can be vague or subjective

Lacks clear predictions

- Not always helpful for policy-making

Does not focus on material power

- Critics say it ignores real-world constraints



Reflection

Choose one **event** from the contemporary world and **explain** it through a theoretical perspective.

- Realist
- Liberal
- Constructivist



Key Takeaways

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How can we make sense of the complexities in the international world?



We can make some intelligent generalisations or have assumptions about certain phenomena.



IR Theories are about seeking to understand and simplify the happenings.



IR Theories tell us whether something is right, what is happening, why it is happening and what might happen to guide us based on assumptions



International Relations comes down to how you interpret the world based on how you see the world (theories)