
Seminar: Social Theory and International Relations

Course description

This class shall render students familiar with an array of social theories that have become driving forces of research in the field of international relations. Most of the sessions will therefore combine basic reading on key concepts and authors with additional reading in which these concepts can be seen “at work”, meaning being used for the analysis and theorization of phenomena of international politics.

The seminar will have two major segments. The first one is a look back on the three major theoretical paradigms of IR. The second will enlarge this range of perspectives by including a selection of more recent debates in the discipline and in social theory generally.

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How we proceed

The general idea and conviction behind this design of the class is the understanding of IR as being part of a long tradition of reflections on social and political phenomena. The “big ideas” of society, politics and history still stand behind the major positions in IR theory.

All the suggested theories have their merits and shortcomings, and students should select those for preparation that they have a particular interest in. The aim of this is that social theory and theories of international relations are just not studied as “dead knowledge” but as intellectual approaches to render the world intelligible. We will look at the architecture of theories and their usage as analytical approaches by adding empirical material in order to see what we find valid or contestable.

This will enable us to critically assess not only theories and schools dealt with in this class, but also to navigate better in the sea of theoretical approaches. Please feel invited to bring in your personal interest in particular schools of thought or theoretical approaches.

Apart from helping each other to come to terms with complex contents, the central question of all sessions will be: **What does the theory at stake help in our understanding and study of international politics?** It is for that reason that each session will also include empirical cases from all kinds of research in order to see what we can see using the given theoretical lense.

My suggestion is to use this class for preparation of research: We will have a classic and a more contemporary text on each subject and these will be read in a division of labor manner.

After the first four sessions, we will change the format. For presentations, students shall form small teams of three (max.) in order to prepare a session. This shall include researching empirical material that allows us to weigh and discuss the pertinence of IR theories and their anchorage in social theories. Please make sure you prepare enough copies of handouts for your presentation. If you send a file to me three days in advance, I can take care of this. Each team is free to design a session along its own ideas and they can call me in at any stage and assign me any role. **Please consult with me at least a week before the session on how you would like to organize the session.** Each session, however, should contain a summary of main arguments of the additional reading and some empirical material that allows for a debate of validity and/or limits.

Those not preparing a session are supposed to have read at least one of the basic readings. For that end, we will occasionally divide the seminar in two sections, A and B, so that only one text is mandatory to be read but we will have a broader base for discussion. If your last name starts with a K or later letter in the alphabet, you are in group B. If it is A-J your are in group A.

Assignments and Grading

For 9 CP: Seminar presentation = 30% of final grade (grade assigned to entire groups);
term paper = 70% of final grade

For 6 CP: Seminar presentation = 50 % of final grade and book review 50% of final grade.

Please observe the MA-IR standards for all written inputs. Late submission will result in reduction of grades, according to the M.A. program stipulations.

Rules for the term paper:

Term papers can focus on one of the discussed theoretical strands, with a general evaluation of its value for our understanding of international relations. This could be done in an empirical testing mode or in a purely theoretical perspective, i.e. by discussing core concepts or comparing theories.

You may of course also work on theories we do not deal with in sessions, but in this case please consult with me. A term paper also always has a research question and an argument as a result. The length of term papers should range between 4.000 and 5.000 words

Rules for book reviews: They are shorter, but also demanding. The reviews shall be written in a manner like you will find it in all decent academic journals. A book review says a bit about the background of the author (if known), about the main arguments, methods, theories employed, and on the material used for the research presented. You present the main argument(s) of the book,

You can pick any book in the field of IR in English, French or German that has a theoretical framework and uses empirical material or is purely theoretical. Please tell me in advance which book you would like to pick so that I can tell you whether it comes into question. Like with term papers, you are encouraged to follow your personal interest here. A book review's length varies between 1.000 and 2.000 words.

Formal standards for all texts: 1.5 spaced, hyphenated justification (*Blocksatz*); font size 12-13. Late submission will result in reduction of grades, according to the M.A. program stipulations. Term papers and book reviews are due on **July 31, 2022, 8 p.m. MET**. I prefer hard copies. If you will not be in town, please send a document (doc or pdf) to Claudia Herold (herold@uni-bremen.de).

Subjects

Intro: Social Theory and IR

Social Action (Weber + applied analysis)

Historicity and Temporality (Schlichte/Stetter + empire discussion)

Practices and Hierarchies (Pouliot + Zarakol)

Fynn Horstmannshof, Stanislav Godobowsky

Negotiation (Abbot/Snidal + simulation)

Suzy Austin

Hegemony (Bourdieu + disc. Hegemonic ordering)

Diogo Machado, Alejandro Ávila, (Paul Jahnke)

Global social inequality (Case, age of questions and Owens, Bismarck/Petraeus)

Livi Diosegi, Alfred Pallarca, Rosalie Handschuh, Samantha Grunow

Modernization and development (Polanyi + Nyerere)

Paul Jahnke, Hunter Litke, Kaynat Akhtar

The state (Mitchell+ Bakonyi on Mogadiscio)

Caitlin Patterson, Zeynep Isik

Consumerism (Barthes + analysis Volkswagen)

Lara Jähnke, Siarhei Viareika, Emil Kaston, Manish Dutta

Political Ecology (Fremaux and Chakrabarthy)

Cole Kovarik, Idil Budak,

March 29:

Session # 1: Introduction

This session will encompass a general introduction into the concept of theory, of the functions or “ends” of theory in social sciences in general and in IR in particular. What is theory good for? What kinds of usage of theory do we observe? The session also entails a discussion of the syllabus with regard to sessions’ content and forms of division of labor and collaboration.

April 5

Session # 2 March 16 Max Weber and the early stages of political sociology

This session will introduce into (often forgotten) basics of social theory and political sociology. We will study the basic vocabulary of Max Weber’s political sociology and we will discuss its applicability and limits for the study of international relations nowadays.

The mandatory reading for this session is long and at times a dry read. Please make sure you get the main definitions of social action, social relationship, power, domination, legitimacy, institution, as we will use the session to establish some basic vocabulary that we can relate to in further sessions. You will find the definitions at the beginning of each § in the text. Don’t be irritated about the use of §-signs, Weber uses forms of legal studies in this text.

Mandatory reading: Weber ([1920] 2004: 311-358)

Presenter: Klaus Schlichte (with group discussion)

April 12

Session # 3: Historicity and Temporality

How do we think about history in IR? Is it linear, regressive, progressive? Are there larger, over-arching processes of work or are we doomed to repeat history over and over again? In this session, we will look into such understandings in different IR theories and discuss a

unpublished text co-authored by myself in order to see what questions have been addressed concerning the banal statement that international politics have a history. But what does this actually mean? What consequences does this have for research and theorizing?

Mandatory reading: Schlichte/Stetter 2022 (pre-print version)

Presenter: Klaus Schlichte (with group discussion)

April 19

Session # 4: Practices or Hierarchies?

Two concepts have been quite influential recently in IR theory debates: practices, on the one hand, as an attempt to invent a new “ontology” to talk about what international politics actually consist of, and, on the other hand, hierarchy as a more systemic conception has been suggested to cover what international politics actually “means”. This second contribution shall be presented by a student group. This session shall serve as an exercise in comparing broadly divergent theoretical approaches. Are they reconcilable or incompatible?

Mandatory reading: Adler/Pouliot 2011

Additional reading: Mattern/Zarakol 2016

Presenters: Fynn Horstmannshof, Stanislav Godobowsky

April 26

Session # 5: Negotiations

How international organizations come about has been a long-standing subject of IR research and theorization. We will discuss a rationalist account of how to explain this. In order to see merits and short-comings of this approach, we will add a practical exercise in the form of a simulation game in this session.

Mandatory Reading: Abbot/Snidal 1998

Organizer of the game: Suzy Austin (please consult “asap” with Klaus Schlichte)

No session on May 3

May 10

Session # 6: Hegemony

With theoretical innovation in social theory on the question of domination and hegemony, IR theories have recently started to translate such understandings from the “domestic arena” – in which such theories have been developed – into the international world. Picking up questions on hierarchy and global order from a previous session, we will look at a new suggestion to think about hegemony, another traditional term of IR theory. The sociology of Pierre Bourdieu is essential for this new suggestion, so we will start with a more general text of Bourdieu before the presenters tell us, what two prominent IR scholars suggest to do with it for the study of global order.

Mandatory Reading: Bourdieu 1989

For presenters: Nexon/Neumann 2017

Presenters: Diogo Machado, Alejandro Ávila, (Paul Jahnke)

May 17

Session # 7: Global social inequality

Since the 19th century, Western intellectuals have been obsessed with the question of social order. The “dangerous classes” are supposed to threaten social and political orders, and this

has led to numerous forms of intervention into the social space. Only recently has this foundational theme of social science found its way into IR debates and theorization. Global social inequality, globalized social policies but also global policing have become subjects of research in this light. But how far does the analogy between state-framed social orders and global social dynamics travel?

Mandatory reading: Case 2015

For the presentation: cases from Breman et al 2019 OR: Owens 2011

Presenters: Livi Diosegi, Alfred Pallarca, Rosalie Handschuh, Samantha Grunow

May 24

Session # 8: Modernization and development

Many theories of IR, liberal ones in particular, rely on understandings of progress and major social change. In particular the idea of “modernity” is crucial here. Based on the reading of a seminal author, Karl Polanyi, we will have a discussion on what this term might imply and whether it helps us to understand international relations. Could we do without it?

The presenters can add a critical author (my suggestion is Walter Rodney) on the story of modernity in a European understanding, given the often rather critical experiences with European expansionism. Alternatively, the ideas of Tanzania’s first president, Julius Nyerere, or Walter Rodney’s criticism of Europe’s global role or any other alternative vision can be presented.

Mandatory Reading: Polanyi , chap. 3

For the presentation: Nyerere 1967 OR Rodney 1972

Presenters: Paul Jahnke, Hunter Litke, Kaynat Akhtar

May 31

Session # 9: The state

IR is still a very state-centric social science, often taking the state for granted or naturalizing it in a person-like manner. Innovative suggestions to think of the state rather as a social production if not construction have, until recently rather been delivered by philosophers or anthropologists. We will discuss Timothy Mitchell’s famous contribution on the state-effect and then look at very recent attempts in IR to think of state-building in a new, very material manner.

Mandatory reading: Mitchell 1999 (for more interested students: 1991)

For the presentation: Bakonyi 2021

Presenters: Caitlin Patterson, Zeynep Isik, Malte Voelkel

June 7

Session # 10: IR from below: Consumerism and the Global Economy

In recent years, more attention has been paid to an “IR in everyday-life”, to the role that consumption patterns have on political and economic relations elsewhere, as the global economy connects production and consumption between continents. Instead of an classical IPE perspective, we will look at consumerism, based on the example of the Volkswagen-car “Beetle” and its global success story. Can cultural theories (e.g. semiotics) help us to understand such global consumption patterns better?

Mandatory reading: Rieger 2013, (Pages???)

For the presentation: either Barthes 1957 Or: Marx 1867

Presenters: Lara Jähnke, Siarhei Viareika, Emil Kaston, Manish Dutta

June 14

Session # 11: Political Ecology

The Anthropocene has made into IR debates as well. While research on global climate politics and environmental protection have a long tradition – especially in Germany – this new turn seems to pose new questions, not only on the policy level but also in terms of theory-building. What is at stake? What theoretical innovation is needed?

Mandatory reading: Fremaux 2019 OR Chakrabarthi 2017

For the presentation: Hickel/Kallis 2020 (or own choice)

Presenters: Cole Kovarik, Idil Budak

Class Reading:

General Reading:

For background information on key terms and on schools of thought in IR theory and social theory, I find the following works very helpful:

Burchill, Scott / Devetak, Richard / Linklater, Scott et al. 2009: *Theories of International Relations*, 4th ed., London: Palgrave.

Carlsnaes, Walter et al. (eds.) 2013: *Handbook of International Relations*, London: Sage.

Harrington, Austin (ed.)(2004): *Modern Social Theory*, Oxford: Oxford UP.

Joas, Hans; Knöbl, Wolfgang (2009): *Social Theory. Twenty Introductory Lectures*. Cambridge, CUP.

General resource: Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (online, <http://plato.stanford.edu/>)

Literature for sessions:

Abbot, Kenneth W. / Snidal, Duncan 1998: Why States Act Through Formal Organizations, in : *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 42, 1, 3-32.

Adler, Emmanuel / Pouliot, Vincent 2011: International Practices, in: *International Theory*, 3, 1, 1-36.

Barthes, Roland 1972 [1957]: *Mythologies*, New York: Noonday Press. (passages “The new Citroen”, “Wine and Milk” + short theory of signs).

Bourdieu, Pierre 1989: Social Space and Symbolic Power, in: *Sociological Theory*, 7, 1, 14-25.

Breman, Jan / Harris, Kevan / Lee, Ching Kwan (eds.) 2019: *The Social Question in the Twenty-First Century*, Berkeley, Cal.: University of California Press.

Case, Holly 2015: The Social Question, 1820-1920, in: *Modern Intellectual History*, June 2015, 1-29.

Chakrabarthi, Dipesh 2017: The Politics of Climate Change is more than the politics of capitalism, in: *Theory, Culture and Society*,

<https://doi.org/10.1177%2F0263276417690236>

Fremaux, Anne 2019: For a critical theory of the Anthropocene,

<https://iiraorg.com/2019/09/01/for-a-critical-theory-of-the-anthropocene/> (accessed February 14, 2022)

Hickel, Jason & Giorgos Kallis (2020) Is Green Growth Possible?, *New Political Economy*, 25:4, 469-486, DOI: [10.1080/13563467.2019.1598964](https://doi.org/10.1080/13563467.2019.1598964)

- Marx, Karl 1867: The Fetishism of Commodities and the Secret thereof, in: *The Capital*, vol. 1, chapter 1, section 4,
<https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1867-c1/ch01.htm#S4>
- Mattern, Janice Bially / Zarakol, Ayşe 2016: Hierarchies in World Politics, in: *International Organization*, 70, 3, 623-654.
- Mitchell, Timothy 1999: Society, Economy, and the State Effect, in: Steinmetz, George (ed.), *State/Culture*
- Mitchell, Timothy 1991: The Limits of the State: Beyond Statist Approaches and their Critics, in: *American Political Science Review*, 85, 1, 77-96.
- Nexon, Dan / Neumann, Iver 2017: Hegemonic-order theory: a field-theoretic account, in: *European Journal of International Relations*, 24, 3, 662-686.
- Nyerere, Julius 1968: *Uhuru na Ujama: a selection from writings and speeches, 1965-1967*, Oxford: OUP.
- Polanyi, Karl [1944] *The Great Transformation*, Boston, Mass.: Beacon Press.
- Owens, Patricia 2011: From Bismarck to Petraeus: the question of the social and the social question in counterinsurgency, in: *European Journal of International Relations*, 19, 1, 139-161.
<https://chimpreports.com/uganda-pens-protest-letter-to-germany-for-interfering-in-kakwenza-court-case/> (accessed February 10, 2022)
- Rieger 2013: *A Global History of the Volkswagen Beetle*, (Pages???)
- Rodney, Walter 1972: *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*, Washington DC: Howard University Press. <https://abahlali.org/files/3295358-walter-rodney.pdf>
- Weber, Max (1946 [1919]): *Politics as a Vocation*, (available online) (<http://www.sscnet.ucla.edu/polisci/ethos/Weber-vocation.pdf>)
- Weber, Max (2004 [1920]): *Basic Sociological Concepts*, in: Whimster, Sam (ed.) *The Essential Weber. A reader*, London: Routledge, 311-358.