

Field Seminar in International Relations

1st Term, Academic Year 2026-2027

Mondays, 15:00 – 17:00 (Seminar room 2, Badia)

Conveners: Stefano Guzzini & Raffaella A. Del Sarto

Office: BF 265 & VS054

E-Mail: stefano.guzzini@eui.eu & raffaella.delsarto@eui.eu

Contact: Sofia Altesini

Description

This seminar surveys the state-of-the-art in the field of international relations (IR) theory and its application. Its theoretical part 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 serves different purposes and comes in different forms. 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’. And besides empirical generalisation, the various forms of theorisation include, for instance, empirically driven designs that abstract by constructing ideal-types or generate hypotheses that can be translated into other empirical contexts, as well as theory-driven designs like concept analysis aiming at better understanding central phenomena of the social world or indeed meta-theory, which reflects on the assumptions with which we construct our theories in the first place. 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).

Drawing on the different modes and functions of theorisation, the second part of the seminar focuses on how theories, perspectives, and concepts come into play – and can be applied – when analysing specific issue-areas in IR. For instance, what can IR theory tell us when analysing the international relations of specific regions in world politics, and how do different types of theories (and theorisation) highlight different aspects and challenges of regional politics? In which way can the relationship between interests, identities and security be conceptualized? How do these conceptualizations contribute to our explanation or understanding of specific developments in world politics? In which way can insights from International Political Economy (IPE) contribute to our understanding of international politics? What do post-colonial and feminist perspectives add to our problematization and understanding of global phenomena? And how can we think about regional order(s) and its relationship to the (changing) global order?

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, as well as chosen applications. 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.

Learning Outcomes

- Researchers will gain an in-depth understanding of contemporary international relations theory
- They will come to understand the variety of modes of IR theorising (meta-theoretical, theoretical / conceptual, empirical - both naturalist and interpretivist, normative / ethical) and their respective ways to evaluate IR theorising
- They will (start to) develop their own perspective on the pluralism that has come to define IR over the past 15 years
- They will reflect on how to use theory (and theorisation) when seeking to understand and/or explain phenomena and developments in global politics

Format

The class will be run as a seminar, where debate and discussion are the norm. For Sessions 2 - 10, response memos – ideally prepared by 1-2 researchers for each session – will inform and guide our debates. Additional (and voluntary) ‘ad hoc seminars’ can be organised to further develop elements of a research design and to respond to particular interests of the participants. The seminar is worth 20 credits.

Requirements

- **Required course:** Researchers taking the seminar as a requirement will prepare two response papers / memos of about 3-4 pages and, as a final assignment, a syllabus on the field of their own research. This partly bibliographic, partly substantial exercise serves to identify and organize the relevant literature later to be addressed in their prospectus. Over the course of the seminar, they are also required to make two short presentations to inform and lead the discussion. The first response memo is to be handed in by week 4, the second by week 8. The final assignment is to be handed in by 18 December.
- **Elective:** Researchers taking the seminar as an elective are required to prepare response papers / memos of about 3-4 pages. Over the course of the seminar, they are also required to make two short presentations to inform and lead the discussion. The first response memo is to be handed in by week 4, the second by week 8.