DEPARTMENT OF INTERNATIONAL POLITICS

International Politics BSc & International Politics and Sociology BSc, 2013-2014

IP1014 Myths & Mysteries in World Politics

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Lectures: Tuesdays 10:00-10:50
Seminars: Tuesdays 11:00, 12:00 or 14:00
**Introduction**

Myths & Mysteries is a required first-year module that will introduce you to core concepts in the study of world politics as well as help you develop critical reading and writing skills. You will consider questions such as:

- What is the nature of power in world politics?
- Is the age of imperialism over?
- Does money and finance make the world go round?
- Does the modern state threaten or protect us?

This module provides an introduction to a range of questions and debates that define contemporary world politics and the study thereof. It adopts a thematic approach, using key terms, events, and concepts as a means through which to begin thinking critically about the myths, mysteries, and puzzles that shape and shake our understandings of world politics today.

**Aims and Objectives**

In the module you will consider core concepts that will help you understand and study world politics. In the process you will learn how to read texts carefully and critically, paying attention to their context, theoretical orientation and political significance. Finally, the module will help you to make your own judgements and learn to write and argue critically about world politics.

**Learning Outcomes: Subject knowledge and understanding**

On successful completion of this module, a student will be expected to be able to:

- Identify the key issues and questions that underpin the study of world politics
- Critically assess the strengths and limitations of relying upon common sense understandings of key issues in world politics.
- Identify the key assumptions and claims that underpin the myths and mysteries of world politics
- Engage critically with these assumptions and the issues they raise
- Develop and defend a position on these issues in light of contemporary scholarly debates
- Identify and problematise common sense understandings of key issues in world politics by developing an explicitly critical and reflexive approach
Teaching Methods

The course is taught through a series of 10 lectures and 10 seminars. Main ideas and controversies will be presented in the lectures and you will have the opportunity to ask questions and develop your thinking in the discussion-based seminars. It is vital that you read deeply and widely for the course in preparation for the seminars, as they will be student led discussions.

You are expected to attend all the lectures and all the seminars. It is also vital that you attend your assigned seminars, as your classmates will be depending on you to contribute to presentations and class discussions. During the term your class tutor will assign you classwork, you are expected to complete all formative coursework assigned.

Assessment

The course will be assessed by three short essays (800 words each) – the first will be due Tuesday 22 October (week 4), the second Tuesday 26 November (week 9) and the third after the Christmas break on Monday 13 January. This method of assessment has been chosen because as a first-year module it is expected that you will be learning to produce critical academic work and writing short pieces that you can get feedback on is vital to the learning process.

In order to pass the module and acquire the associated credit, you must achieve a module mark of no less than 40%.

Essay Questions

You will be given essay questions by the course convenor prior to each essay. It may be possible to develop your own essay questions with the course convenor but it is vital that have your question approved before you write your essay.

Reflective Learning Week (week 6)

Please note that there will be no IP1014 lectures or tutorials this week. There will be department wide activities for students this week. It also provides you an opportunity to catch-up on coursework and to begin thinking about your assessed essay topic.

Course Literature

There are very few readings for this course but you will be expected to read the essential materials fully and closely. Additional materials are references are provided for writing your essays and expanding your knowledge of the topics. The key goal of this course is to introduce you to core ideas and encourage your reading skills – so it will be about the quality rather than quantity of reading that you do.
**Office Hours**

Dr Aggie Hirst – Thursday 10:00-11:00 and Friday 13:00-14:00, Room D519  
Dr Joe Hoover – Tuesday and Wednesday 11:00-12:00, Room D522  
Dr Amin Samman – Monday 15:00-17:00, Room D521

**Course Outline**

| Week 1       | Lecture: *Becoming Political?*  
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<td>1 October 2013</td>
<td>Tutorial: Module Introduction</td>
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| Week 2       | Lecture and Tutorial: *Power Relations and the Political: What is Power?*  
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| Week 3       | Lecture and Tutorial: *The Possibility of Ethical Politics*  
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| Week 4       | Lecture and Tutorial: *Political Violence: Why Does Violence Persist in the Modern World?*  
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| Week 5       | Lecture and Tutorial: *International Law: Between Justice and Power*  
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| Week 6       | Reflective Learning Week  
|--------------|---------------------------------|
| 5 November 2013 | NO LECTURES OR TUTORIALS  
|               | Department-wide Events |

| Week 7       | Lecture and Tutorial: *Empire and (Post)Colonialism: Is the Age of Imperialism Over?*  
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| Week 8       | Lecture and Tutorial: *Questioning Capitalism: Are Markets as Free, Competitive, and Progressive as We Say They Are?*  
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| Week 9       | Lecture and Tutorial: *Understanding and Justifying the State*  
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| Week 10      | Lecture and Tutorial: *Dollars and Sense: Does Money and Finance Make the World Go Round?*  
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| Week 11      | Lecture: *The Politics of History: What Do We Do When We Think Historically?*  
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Reading List

Week 1 – Becoming Political?

The study of politics is more than an academic discipline. It is also not a simple social science in which we look for facts about the world. We all participate in politics, have a politics and are political subjects by virtue of our placement in the social world and our ability to act. This session will introduce the course and encourage you to think about why it is important to study world politics – in particular why it is important for you to study world politics.

Questions

1. What is politics?
2. Why do we study politics?
3. How are the ways we think about politics important?

Essential Resources


Further Resources

Bill Moyers interview with Sheldon Wolin:
- Part 1 (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-wlHB6jSe7s)
- Part 2 (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K6HMQM7Lo58)

Week 2 – Power Relations and the Political: What is Power?

The concept of ‘power’ is one of the most contested in the study of world politics, yet it remains a crucial point of departure if the dynamics of the current world order are to be understood. Power can be viewed as a name for the force which causes things to change or to remain the same in the international system. This framing poses crucial questions such as who wields power in world politics, why some people enjoy the exercise of power while others remain without access to much of it, and what kinds of material effects these power inequalities have. This session introduces students to the idea that power is not simply a phenomenon by means of which actors compel other actors to behave in certain ways, but rather a series of relationships which govern our political lives in the most subtle of ways. The aim of the session is to show that many inequalities which appear ‘natural’ or ‘inevitable’ are actually ‘power relations’ which are political in character, and that this observation is a crucial step towards understanding and challenging the current world order.

Essential Readings


Challenge:

Prepare notes for discussion on a particular example or form of hidden ‘power relations’ that came to your attention when thinking about this topic, either in the news, in your social life, something you witnessed in the street, etc. (Hint: think about class, gender, race, sexual orientation, ethnicity, religion, nationality, citizenship status, political affiliation). Come to class ready to discuss this example of disciplinary power.

Further Readings


**Week 3 – The Possibility of Ethical Politics**

Despite the rhetoric of politicians, which often makes lofty appeal to morality, both moralist and political scientist tend to be wary of the place of ethics in political life. Should the polis be defined by a common conception of the good? Is the law moral? Or is politics a technocratic affair involving the balancing of competing interests and maintaining social control? In this session we will consider whether ethics can tame and legitimise political power, as well as how ethics services as a justification for violence and control.

**Questions**

1. What is ethics? Can it be distinguished from social rules, such as the law or religious custom?

2. Think of an instance when political actors use ethical language – what political work does this appeal do?

3. Can ethical concerns effect politics? Think of examples for your answer.

**Essential Readings**


**Further Readings**


Week 4 – Political Violence: Why Does Violence Persist in the Modern World?

According to many scholars and commentators, violence is a constant and unavoidable feature of world politics. Issues such as war, terrorism, and torture reside at the heart of academic discussions and news broadcasts about contemporary political life, and distinctions between “legitimate” and “illegitimate” forms of violence are frequently invoked to make sense of these phenomena. Yet violence as a concept remains poorly understood and highly contested, and many forms of violence are under-theorised and excluded from the study of world politics. The purpose of this session is to engage with the question of what violence “is” and what forms or features of violence characterise contemporary international politics. Building on previous weeks’ discussions about power relations, this session expands our understanding of where and what kinds of violence persist in world politics, exploring issues including gendered and sexual violence, material and economic violence, and the subtle exclusionary violences of everyday disciplinary power.

Required Preparation

Read:


Explore:

The Histories of Violence website: www.historiesofviolence.com and respond to the following questions:

1. What kinds of violences can you identify? Is violence necessarily something physical?
2. Why does violence seem to play such an enduring role in world politics?
3. Is violence always a bad thing in world politics?
4. What is the relationship between violence and power?

Further Readings


Ruth Blakeley, “Bringing the State Back into Terrorism Studies,” European Political Science, Volume 6, Number 3 (2007), 228-235.


Todd May, “The Dignity of Non-Violence,”


Week 5 – International Law: Between Justice and Power

The law is ambiguous, as it is both the set of rules laid down by authorities to control and limit society, as well as an appeal to higher ideals for political behaviour that limits the vagaries of power. How does law function in world politics? Many have argued that law at the international level is ephemeral or primitive, providing some rules of interaction but unable to overcome the power of states to act as they wish. Others have claimed that it provides a rational, or even moral, grounding for international order that constrains state interest – even if that constraint is sometimes found wanting. These distinctions have defined our understanding of international law, but they do not exhaust its dilemmas – as we will see international law is about more than the interaction of equal states and in fact expresses forms of political hierarchy in world politics even as it is based in formal sovereign equality.

Questions

1. What is the source of the law’s authority?

2. Can you think of examples in which international law constrains state action?

3. Who is international law for?

Essential Readings


Further Readings


Week 6 – Reflective Learning Week

Events during reading week to be announced.
Week 7 – Empire and (Post)Colonialism: Is the Age of Imperialism Over?

If traditional histories are to be believed, the age of Empire came to an end during the period of decolonisation which began following the end of World War II. Undeniably, formal independence and sovereign statehood were granted to many former colonies during this period. However, the current global landscape has led many scholars to question whether or not the colonial period really is a thing of the past; political and economic inequalities persist along lines which closely resemble those at work during the period of formal colonisation, and issues of discrimination, racism and xenophobia remain widespread. This session explores the suggestion that ‘neo-colonial’ and ‘neo-imperial’ power relations still exist today, introducing students to challenges made by post-colonial scholars critical of the enduring colonialism of world politics.

Required Preparation

Read and watch:

Interview with Edward Said: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fVC8EYd_Z_g


Challenge:

Watch Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom and make notes on the following questions:

1. What kinds of power relations are discernable in how the various characters interact? (Hint: What are the distinguishing characteristics of the heroes, villains and supporting cast? Who is in charge, who is challenged, who is saved? Who does the audience sympathise which, and who is expendable?)

2. Who is presented as ‘reasonable’ and who as ‘mystical’ or ‘irrational’?

3. Can you think of any other films which present different types of people in similarly different ways? Think about who the ‘heroes’ and ‘villains’ are.

4. Do such representations in a medium such a popular film matter politically? Why/why not?

Further Readings


Ania Loomba, *Colonialism/Postcolonialism* (New York: Routledge, 1998), Chapter 1 and Conclusion.


**Week 8 – Questioning Capitalism: Are Markets as Free, Competitive, and Progressive as We Say They Are?**

The economic dimension is crucial to world politics. Media commentary typically acknowledges this by alluding to ‘market forces’, ‘competitive pressures’, and the influence of ‘economic globalisation’. But what are market forces? Moreover, do market economies really exhibit all of the economic and political advantages over planned economies that are usually ascribed to them? This session invites students to approach these questions by thinking critically about the nature of capitalism, focusing in particular on how states, corporations, and other influential global actors shape and are shaped by market forces.

**Questions**

1. What is free about free markets?
2. Are all capitalist markets free markets?
3. Can capitalist markets survive without the state?
4. Can the world survive without capitalism?

**Essential Preparation**

Watch:


Read:


**Further Readings**


Further Resources


Michael Truscello (Dir.) Capitalism is the Crisis: Radical Politics in the Age of Austerity (Circle Eh Pictures, 2011). Approximately 100 minutes. Full movie available at: http://topdocumentaryfilms.com/capitalism-is-the-crisis/
Week 9 – Understanding and Justifying the State

All too often the study of politics takes the existence and desirability of the state for granted. This has not always been the case. Canonical political theory was centrally concerned with how to justify the state as a new political formation, as well as with understanding what forms of freedom and control the modern state required. Variously the state has been understood as the exclusive domain of a singular sovereign, the result of a contract between free men, the organic expression of national culture, and the protector of the rights of the democratic community. We will consider what the state is and why its justification is so fraught, paying particular attention to how the notion of sovereignty as independence and equality between states shapes our understanding of world politics.

Questions

1. What does the state do?
2. Do feel a sense of belonging to the state in which you live? What is that sense of belonging based on?
3. How is the state fundamental to conventional understandings of world politics?

Essential Readings


Further Readings


Week 10 – Dollars and Sense: Does Money and Finance Make the World Go Round?

Money has always been a mystery. On one hand, economies have come to rely on it in a range of different ways; but on the other, economists still struggle to understand exactly what it is or how it works. Recent developments in world politics have pushed the puzzle of money centre-stage. For example, geopolitical shifts have raised questions about the international role of the dollar, while financial and sovereign debt crises have focused attention on the role of new financial technologies. Many are now asking whether there is anything natural or necessary about how money and finance figure within the world economy. In light of these debates, this session encourages students to think critically about what we do with money and what money does with us.

Questions

1. What functions does money perform within contemporary capitalism?
2. Does it make sense to understand money in terms of its functions?
3. Can we distinguish between the ‘real economy’ and the ‘financial economy’?
4. Can you think of any examples where monetary and financial technologies have been used to challenge the status quo?

Essential Readings


Further Readings


Week 11 – The Politics of History: What Do We Do When We Think Historically?

In American slang, when something ‘is history’ it doesn’t matter: it’s done, it’s over, and it’s consigned to the past. But in the world of politics, things from the past don’t always stay there. In fact, key events such as the Russian Revolution, the Great Depression, the Holocaust, Hiroshima, the Vietnam War, and September 11th are always reappearing in contemporary political debate. This raises important questions about how our ideas and stories about historical change relate to the process of change itself. For example, how do appeals to the Great Depression continue to shape responses to the crises of capitalism? This session introduces students to some of the literature on history and world politics, inviting them to consider what is at stake when we think and speak historically.

Questions

1. What is it that makes an event ‘historical’?

2. Is it possible for accounts of the past to be objective?

3. In what ways can remembering or forgetting the past be a political intervention? Try to think of examples.

4. What is more important: that our histories are truthful, or that they are useful?

Essential Readings


Further Readings


