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Concepts and theories in international relations



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Introduction

‘Concepts’ and ‘theories’ are key tools in the study of International Relations (IR). They can help to impose a kind of analytical order on the real world in order to make it more understandable. However, concepts and theories fulfil different roles in IR, and there are also a variety of theories that approach the subject in different ways.



Figure 1 Mind mapping concepts and their relationships to one another

In this course, you will start by covering the main differences between concepts and theories in the study of IR, and how they can help further our understanding. Afterwards, you will go on to learn about seven influential IR theories. You will find out about how these theories often take different approaches to IR, using different kinds of knowledge and addressing different questions.

This OpenLearn course is an adapted extract from the Open University course D322 *International relations: people, power and change*. You can find out more about Open University courses and qualifications, tuition fees and funding options by visiting our online prospectus.

Learning outcomes

After studying this course, you should be able to:

- understand the difference between concepts and theories of International Relations, and how they are used
- appreciate the difference between positivist and post-positivist approaches to International Relations
- have a good overview of a range of influential theories of International Relations
- recognise the key tenets, concepts, principles and theorists associated with the following International Relations theories: realism, Marxism, postcolonialism, constructivism, liberalism, ecofeminism, and poststructuralism
- critically analyse some of the relative strengths and weaknesses of different theories of International Relations.

1 Concepts and theories in focus

Terms like ‘concepts’ and ‘theories’ are used quite routinely when explaining why we think what we think about a particular topic, but they also have a more technical meaning when it comes to the study of IR. If we want to set aside partisan interpretations to build up a comprehensive picture of the complex web of reasons behind events and issues in international relations, then these more technical understandings of ‘concepts’ and theories’ can be very useful.

Put simply, concepts are the general ideas and terms that can be used to categorise observations about international relations, whereas theories are the simplifications of the world that can be used to interpret the relationship between key actors, issues and events.

Activity 1

Allow approximately 25 minutes

Watch the following two videos, which will give you an overview of what concepts and theories mean in the study of IR. Once you have watched the animations, complete the task that follows.

Video content is not available in this format.
Video 1 Concepts in International Relations



Video content is not available in this format.
Video 2 Theories in International Relations



For each of the statements shown below, correctly determine whether it describes the notion of a concept or theory in IR by clicking the relevant pink ‘Concept’ or green ‘Theory’ button. For non-mouse users, use ‘Numpad 1’ to select ‘Concept’ and ‘Numpad 2’ to select ‘Theory’. The correct answers will be revealed when you have assigned all of the statements. If you select a category in error, you can use the ‘Reset’ button to clear your answers and begin again.

Interactive content is not available in this format.

Discussion

Concepts and theories are often spoken about in everyday life, as part of explanations for how the world works. Now, you have a clearer idea of the more technical ways in which these terms are used in the study of International Relations, it is worth thinking about how a more refined understanding of ‘concepts’ and ‘theories’ can help you think more about how they relate to one another. Indeed, various different concepts might be used within theories of International Relations to help produce more comprehensive explanations of real-world events and the myriad of factors that feed into them.

As you will find out as you progress through this course, different theories might treat the same key concepts in deeply divergent ways. On the other hand, theories might rest upon entirely different sets of concepts.

2 Realism and Marxism

In this section of the course, you will have the opportunity to engage in detail with two IR theories. As you will recall from Section 1, a theory is essentially a framework for understanding, which helps identify the relationships between different factors and seeks to explain phenomena in international relations.

Beyond this, though, scholars sometimes disagree on what their theory of IR should actually do. For some, the purpose of theory is to simplify the world in ways that can provide better explanations of what is happening and the relationships that underpin these happenings. For others, though, the mere fact of theorising about IR entails decisions about what to prioritise or overlook, and thus has an impact on what the world looks like.

In this section, you will be exploring two contrasting theories of IR: realism and Marxism. Both have established long traditions of thinking about power in international relations in different ways.

Activity 2

Allow approximately 40 minutes

Part 1: Realism theory quiz

10 minutes

Watch the animation about realism in International Relations, then work through the set of flashcards, in each case choosing the one that best reflects the realist perspective.

Video content is not available in this format.
Video 3 Realism in International Relations



Interactive content is not available in this format.

Discussion

Hopefully you will have been able to correctly identify some of the key features of realism, based on what you learned in the video. Remember, though, it is often difficult to define and apply a theoretical position based only on a true/false simplification. For this reason, it is important to start building a nuanced understanding of the key principles and features of realism.

Part 2: Realism – key principles and features

10 minutes

Watch the Realism video again and make some notes relating to each of the bullet point prompts below, then click to reveal the course team's answers.

The four key principles of realism are:Three traditions within realism mentioned are:Three key figures in realism are:Main criticisms of the realist tradition:

Discussion

The four key principles of realism in IR are:

- the centrality of states in international relations
- the lack of an overarching authority to control those states, producing an anarchy
- the consequential priority for states to ensure their own survival and security
- the pursuit of that security through power.

Three traditions within realism are:

- Classical realism, focused on competition for power as a function of human nature
- Structural realism, focused on the anarchy of the international system as the driver of competition
- Neoclassical realism, focused on how actions and perceptions of actions impact state competition

Three key figures in realism are:

- Hans Morgenthau
- Kenneth Waltz
- John Mearsheimer

Main criticisms of the realist tradition: the focus on states can lead to ignoring the role of other actors, while realism can also over-emphasise competition over cooperation. In addition critics say realism is too western-centric and too focused on great powers.

Part 3: Marxism theory quiz

10 minutes

Now watch the animation about Marxism in International Relations, then work through the set of flashcards, in each case choosing the one that best reflects the Marxist perspective.

Video content is not available in this format.
Video 4 Marxism in International Relations



Interactive content is not available in this format.

Discussion

Hopefully you will have been able to correctly identify some of the key features of Marxism, based on what you learned in the video. As you learned with respect to realism, though, it can be difficult to define and apply a theoretical position based only on a true/false simplification. For this reason, it is important to start building a nuanced understanding of the key principles and features of Marxism.

Part 4: Marxism – key principles and features

10 minutes

Watch the Marxism video again and make some notes relating to each of the bullet point prompts below, then click to reveal the course team's answers.

The key focus of Marxism in IR is:Four key ideas of Marxist IR:Two key contemporary IR scholars working in the Marxist tradition:Main criticisms of the Marxist tradition:

Discussion

The key focus of Marxism in IR is: the interrelated development of the state system and global capitalism, and how it might be transformed

Four key ideas of Marxist IR:

- the international system is made up of a state system and a capitalist world economy
- the states that make up the system vary according to the class relationships within each society
- states' actions in international relations are contingent on the interests of the ruling classes, and on the position of the state within the global economic hierarchy
- international relations are shaped and re-shaped by economic booms and busts.

Two key contemporary IR scholars working in the Marxist tradition: Robert Cox, Justin Rosenberg

Main criticisms of the Marxist tradition: Some argue it over-emphasises the negative aspects of capitalism compared with capitalism's benefits; others believe it over-emphasises class hierarchies over, for example, racialised or gendered ones.

This section has introduced you to realist and Marxist approaches to IR. You have learned that the core principles of realism are state-centrism, anarchy, survival and power. You were introduced to some of the different schools of realism, including classical realism, structural realism and neo-classical realism. You will have noted some differences or tensions within the realist tradition as to why states seek power, how power is defined and measured, and whether there is or should be any limits to the amount of power states seek.

In your introduction to Marxism, you have learned about its development as a general social theory, which has nevertheless developed unique analyses of international relations, particularly focusing on the relationship between the development of the state system and the capitalist world economy. You will have seen that power is also a key concept in Marxist approaches to IR, but in this case, the focus tends to be on the distribution of economic and social power. So, whilst different IR theories might rest upon similar concepts, they may interpret them in significantly different ways.

3 Constructivism and postcolonialism

In this section of the course, you will gain an understanding of two important perspectives within contemporary International Relations: constructivism and postcolonialism. Whilst both of these approaches touch upon the importance of ideas, identities and discourse in understanding International Relations, their different starting points mean that they approach these issues in contrasting ways.

Activity 3

Allow approximately 30 minutes

Part 1: Constructivism theory quiz

10 minutes

Watch the animation about Constructivism in International Relations, then work through the set of flashcards, in each case choosing the one that best reflects the constructivist perspective.

Video content is not available in this format.
Video 5 Constructivism in International Relations



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Part 2: Postcolonialism theory quiz

10 minutes

Now watch the animation about Postcolonialism in International Relations, then work through the set of flashcards, in each case choosing the one that best reflects the postcolonial perspective.

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Video 6 Postcolonialism in International Relations



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Part 3: Comparing constructivism and postcolonialism

10 minutes

As you have learned over this short course so far, it can be difficult to define and apply a theoretical position based only on a true/false simplification. One way in which to achieve a more nuanced understanding of IR theories is to take an

explicitly comparative approach to understand how they approach their topic of study.

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In this section, you have learned about constructivism and postcolonialism. First, you learned how constructivist approaches see the international system as socially constructed rather than determined solely by material forces. In this world view, identities are constructed through social interaction with others, and these identities go on to shape state behaviour, including what becomes generally accepted behaviour.

You also learned about postcolonial IR theory, which emerged as scholars from the Global South began to challenge western-centric theories about international relations. This worldview emphasises the ways in which today's international order continues to be shaped by colonial history and residual imperial power structures. You will also note how postcolonial theorists have been influenced by other schools of thought, including Marxism (which you met in Section 2) and feminism (which you will meet in Section 4).

4 Liberalism and ecofeminism

In this section of the course, you will learn about liberal and ecofeminist approaches to International Relations. You will note that liberal approaches tend to emphasise the role that international institutions and shared values can play in helping address key global challenges. By contrast, ecofeminist approaches are more closely linked to social activism, with a subsequent focus more on grassroots movements than state-linked structures.

Activity 4

Allow approximately 30 minutes

Part 1: Liberalism theory quiz

10 minutes

Watch the animation about liberalism in International Relations, then work through the set of flashcards, in each case choosing the one that best reflects the liberal perspective.

Video content is not available in this format.
Video 7 Liberalism in International Relations



Interactive content is not available in this format.

Part 2: Ecofeminism theory quiz

10 minutes

Watch the animation about ecofeminism in International Relations, then work through the set of flashcards, in each case choosing the one that best reflects the ecofeminist perspective.

Video content is not available in this format.
Video 8 Ecofeminism in International Relations



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Part 3: The language of liberalism and ecofeminism

10 minutes

You have learned throughout this short course how true/false simplifications do not always capture all the important features of IR theories. In the previous section, you built up your understanding by comparing the approaches taken by two theories. In

this section, you will build your understanding of liberalism and ecofeminism by comparing some of the key concepts that they use, and what these mean.

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In this section, you have learned about liberalism and ecofeminism. Both theories have produced ideas and words that have become part of everyday speech, but for which everyday uses do not always capture the more specific meanings that words have in their original context. It is useful to reflect on how and why there can be a stretching or distortion of meanings, sometimes because most people are not closely invested in the ins and outs of the theory and sometimes because it is easy to caricature positions that you disagree with.

In many ways, liberalism and ecofeminism look at similar questions, most obviously about human nature and the impact of social structures. On the one hand, liberalism is often linked to Enlightenment ideals such as rational thought and individual freedom. Its focus tends to be on the institutions and mechanisms for cooperation that can exist within the current system of international relations to ensure equal access to resources and opportunities. By contrast, ecofeminism takes a more critical approach to the current system of international relations, informed by the contention that it is inherently structured around the domination of women and nature (as well as other hierarchies), and fails to take seriously alternative approaches to social organisation, including indigenous perspectives.

5 Poststructuralism

In this section of the course, you will learn about poststructuralist theories of international relations. Poststructuralist approaches take a critical stance, interrogating how particular understandings of the world gain acceptance as uncontested fact. They are concerned with how social meanings are made, enforced, contested and renegotiated in relation to other social factors.

Activity 5

Allow approximately 25 minutes

Part 1: Poststructuralism theory quiz

10 minutes

Watch the animation about poststructuralism in International Relations, then select which of the following statements about the poststructuralist approach to international relations are true and which are false.

Video content is not available in this format.
Video 9 Poststructuralism in International Relations



Interactive content is not available in this format.

Part 2: Poststructuralist approaches to IR

15 minutes

As you have learned throughout the prior sections of this short course, true/false simplifications are a helpful revision tactic but they do not always capture all the important features of IR theories. In the following activity, you will be expanding on your understanding of poststructuralist approaches to IR by considering what they are, and are not, most helpful for achieving.

What is a poststructuralist approach to international relations most useful for? Select all that apply.

You can attempt the question as many times as you'd like. To reveal the correct answer untick all the selections and click 'Reveal answer' at the bottom of the activity.

- ☐ Establishing causality between different variables in international relations
- ☐ Interrogating how dominant structures of knowledge and understanding came about
- ☐ Challenging political assumptions that have been taken-for-granted
- ☐ Examining the political effects of particular language choices
- ☐ Predicting behaviours of state and non-state actors
- ☐ Establishing parsimonious or universal accounts of international relations
- ☐ Revealing objective facts about international relations using scientific methods
- ☐ Helping uncover how dominant discourses and representations can shape international relations
- ☐ Examining the contingency of many of the supposedly objective facts of international relations, as well as how they undergo constant reinforcement and reproduction
- ☐ Explaining why political actors behave in the ways that they do, and what effects this has

In this section of the course, you have been introduced to poststructuralist theories of International Relations. Where you have encountered various IR theories that seek to explain developments in international relations, poststructuralism is not an explanatory theory. Instead, it is a critical theory, in that it challenges some of the assumptions that other approaches might take for granted.

Poststructuralist approaches interrogate how social meanings are made, enforced, contested and renegotiated in relation to other social factors, and how certain understandings of the world come to gain acceptance as fact.

Conclusion

This course has introduced you to the meaning and function of concepts and theories in the study of International Relations. As you have learned, concepts are a tool that thinkers use to categorise the world around them, whilst theories offer a framework for understanding how the different elements of that world are connected to one another.

There is a great variety of theoretical approaches to international relations, and you have had the opportunity to engage with seven of these in detail. Resting on different philosophies, premises and assumptions, these theories tend to approach key issues in international relations in different ways. So, on the one hand, they might rely upon similar sets of concepts to categorise the world, but provide contrasting interpretations of these key concepts (recall the different ways in which realists and Marxists view power, as well as how poststructuralists link power to discourse). Alternatively, they might incorporate specific sets of concepts better suited to the issues that they aim to address (recall liberal ideas of norms and cooperation, constructivists' focus on the process of social construction, as well as postcolonialist and ecofeminist attention to colonialism and gender).

Beyond their contrasting uses of key concepts, the seven theoretical traditions in IR that you have encountered in this course take fundamentally different approaches to their key topics of interest. This might be the state-focused elements of realist approaches, the economic aspects addressed by Marxist approaches, or the political and gender hierarchies considered by postcolonial and feminist approaches respectively. It might be the issues of discourse and values that, in one way or another, find themselves central to constructivist, poststructuralist and liberal approaches.

As you have learned throughout this course, each IR theory has different strengths and weaknesses. The key thing is to be able to relate the theoretical perspective to the problem under consideration, to ensure that its insights are of use in understanding the real-world problems and questions you are investigating. This short course has equipped you with the basics of each of these seven theoretical traditions, so that you can begin to make these connections yourself as you try to make sense of developments in international relations.

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