PS 580: Proseminar in IR

Logistics

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Course Description

Believe it or not: this proseminar in international relations is designed to introduce you to the field of international relations. IR is extremely broad and incredibly difficult, and there is no way for us to do it any justice in a single semester. Instead, we will focus on a few key topics that will help you get a sense of the field and prepare you for the rest of your graduate career. These topics are equally substantive and methodological: we will spend quite a bit of time thinking about what sorts of questions are worth asking and how we might go about answering them. Y.H.I. has decided to orient the course around two levels of analysis: the state and the international system. Questions of state dominate the first half of the course, and questions of the system dominate the second. This order is borderline heretical with respect to most IR seminars, but Y.H.I. thinks it makes sense to discuss the origins of order before discussing the nature of international anarchy. We will also spend a fair amount of time discussing the role of theory in IR, and we will read a few pieces of theory that are particularly important to the field. It promises to be great fun so long as you've got an open mind, heaping helpings of curiosity and humility, and a very large coffee mug. Expect to leave each meeting ready for a nap and armed with more questions than answers.

Course Procedure

This course is designed to be a seminar, which means that we will spend most of our time discussing the readings. Your job is to read the material, think about it, and come to class ready to talk about it. Y.H.I.'s job is to provide context, ask questions, and kick the ball back into play when it goes out of bounds—and frankly, if the ball hasn't gone out of bounds at least once per meeting, then we're not doing our collective duty as a seminar.[1]

Course Requirements

1. *Participation:* you are expected to come to class (on time) having read the material and ready to discuss it. You are expected to say things cooler than "I agree with what she said" or "I disagree with what he said" or (especially) "I thought the reading was interesting." You are expected to be respectful of your classmates and to accept criticism in the spirit in which it is offered. You are expected to be present in body and mind.

   And look, sometimes a seminar squares on the readings quite intensely, and sometimes it uses the readings the way a jazz musician uses a standard: as a jumping-off point for improvisation. Both are fine, and both are necessary. You need to be able to do both. But as anybody that's tried to play jazz can tell you, improvisation doesn't mean "anything goes"—you have to know the standard cold before you can start riffing on it. So too with this seminar: you have to know the readings cold before you can start riffing on them.

   In evaluating your participation, Y.H.I. will consider the quality and quantity of your contributions, as well as your preparedness, attentiveness,

[1] Repeat: if the ball hasn't gone out of bounds at least once per meeting, then we're not doing our collective duty as a seminar. If you are not confused at least once per meeting, then you are not thinking hard enough. *It is your solemn duty to be confused, lost, uncertain, and downright wrong at least once per meeting.* These readings are *hard* and this topic is *hard* and the associated metatheoretical questions are *hard*. You are not a spectator but an *active participant*, which means you must make your confusion, uncertainty, and wrongness *visible* to your classmates. This, too, is part of your solemn duty, and indeed it is the finest example of scholarly generosity Y.H.I. can imagine. *Stop being right every time you open your mouth: it is boring and unproductive.* (And yet: read the room, and be respectful of your classmates' time, thoughts, vulnerabilities, boundaries, and attention; listening is part of the deal, too.)

and respectfulness. This involves the creativity behind your point of view, the clarity of your logic, the generativity of your questions, then charity of your interpretations, and the humility of your attitude. And that other thing you should be doing!

2. *Advocacy:* each week, one student (the Advocate) will be responsible for defending one of the readings (marked with a star, ⋆), and another student (the Critic) will be responsible for critiquing it. The Advocate will speak first, and the Critic second. The Advocate's task is to situate the reading in the broader literature, explain its contribution, suss out some of its unexplored implications, and identify its strengths. The Critic's task is to call into question the reading's assumptions, poke holes in its argument, and identify its weaknesses. Neither the Advocate nor the Critic should spend much time summarizing the reading; everyone is expected to have read it. Both the Advocate and the Critic should write a short (1–2 page) memo summarizing their thoughts and submit it by 5p the Sunday before class. The seminar ought to be *hyped* for the Advocate and Critic to do their thing, and Y.H.I. will do his best to facilitate a lively discussion. Each participant must be the Advocate and Critic at least once during the semester, and no participant may advocate (or critique) twice without everyone else having done so once, thrice without everyone else having done so twice, and so on. We also will not allow rematches. Finally, we all will support the Advocate and Critic by reading their memos and coming to class ready to discuss them, not to mention voicing our support for their arguments and critiques.

3. *Final Exam:* the final exam will be a take-home exam that will be distributed on the last day of class and due at 5pm on the last day of finals. It will consist of two questions, and you will be expected to answer both of them. The questions will be broad and open-ended, and you will be expected to draw on the readings and discussions *and* some material outside the syllabus. Further details will be provided later in the semester.

Y.H.I. is not assigning weights to these requirements because he does not want to encourage you to think about them as discrete tasks. Instead, he wants you to think about them as complementary parts of a single whole. You will not be able to participate effectively if you have not read the material, and you will not be able to advocate or critique effectively if you have not participated effectively.

And don't even get Y.H.I. started on how you'll do on the final if you haven't taken the other two seriously.

Course Schedule

The basic structure is as follows:

Week	Topic
	Module the First: Three Problems in International Relations
01	The Ontology Problem
02	The Levels of Analysis Problem
03	The Rationality Problem
	Module the Second: The State
04	The Ontological Status of the State
05	The Organization of Violence
06	Property Rights and Protection
07	Credibility and Debt
08	The Size, Number, and Survival of States
09	A Smattering of Domestic IR
10	Civil Disorder
	Module the Third: The International System
11	The Ontological Status of the System
12	Anarchy and Hierarchy
13	The Market System
14	Systemic Change and Continuity
15	Bargaining and Commitment

Three Problems in International Relations

We start with three problems fundamental to the discipline. To be sure, there are many other problems that we could discuss—and indeed, we probably will at some point. But these three are just, like, part of the deal, and we all have to grapple with them to some extent.

Week 01: The Ontology Problem

The fundamental problem of international relations is that we do not know what we are talking about. Ontology is the branch of philosophy that deals with the nature of being, so it behooves us to start there. What exists in the world, and what does not? What is the nature of these things, their structure, and their relationships? We will read a few pieces that will help us think about these questions, and we will discuss how they relate to the field of international relations. We will also discuss the role of theory in IR.

- W.V.O. Quine. 1948. "On What There Is." *Review of Metaphysics* 2.
- E.J. Lowe. 2006. *The Four-Category Ontology: A Metaphysical Foundation for Natural Science.* Chapter 1 ("Ontological Categories and Categorical Schemes").
- Peter van Inwagen. 1993. *Metaphysics,* Fifth (2024) edition. Chapters 1 ("Introduction") and 6 ("Necessary Being: The Ontological Argument").

Week 02: The Levels of Analysis Problem

Meanwhile, IR is plagued by a methodological problem closely related to the ontology problem: the levels of analysis problem. What should we study, and how should we study it? What do we lose when we focus on one level of analysis at the expense of another? Are "higher" levels of analysis more/less important than "lower" levels of analysis? More/less reliable, more/less valid, more/less scientific, more/less useful, more/less essential to IR?

- ⋆ Kenneth N. Waltz. 1959. *Man, the State, and War.* Chapters I ("Introduction"), II ("The First Image"), IV ("The Second Image"), and VI ("The Third Image").
- Jon Elster. 1982. "The Case for Methodological Individualism." *Theory and Society* 11.
- Amie Thomasson. 2007. *Ordinary Objects.* Chapters 1 ("Problems of Causal Redundancy") and 9 ("Parsimony and Ontological Commitment").
- Robert E. Lucas, Jr. 1976. "Econometric Policy Evaluation: A Critique." *Carnegie-Rochester Conference Series on Public Policy* 1.

Week 03: The Rationality Problem

Then there lurks in the background a methodological problem that is not unique to IR but is particularly important to it: the rationality problem. What does it mean to be rational, and how do we know when we have found it? What sorts of entities can be rational, and what sorts of entities cannot? How does rationality relate to ontology and to the levels of analysis problem?

- ⋆ Miles Kahler. 1998. "Rationality in International Relations." *International Organization* 52.
- Jon Elster. 1989. *Nuts and Bolts for the Social Sciences.* Parts 1 ("Introduction") and 2 ("Human Action").
- Henry Farrell and Martha Finnemore. 2008. "Ontology, Methodology, and Causation in the American School of International Political Economy." *Review of International Political Economy* 16.
- Kenneth Arrow. 1950. "A Difficulty in the Concept of Social Welfare." *Journal of Political Economy* 58.

The State

The state is the fundamental unit of analysis in international relations, and it is the subject of much debate. Being committed to it, we must ask: what *is* it? What is its role in the international system? We will start with the ontology of the state, then move on to its organization, property rights, and the role of debt.

Week 04: The Ontological Status of the State

Oh, so you're going to commit your theories to the state as the fundamental unit of analysis? Well, what is the state, and why do you think it's a good bet for a unit of analysis? Is the state a thing, a person, an effect, a performance, a myth, or a convenience?

- ⋆ Erik Ringmar. 1996. "On the Ontological Status of the State." *European Journal of International Relations* 2.

- David A. Lake. 2009. "The State and International Relations," in *The Oxford Handbook of International Relations,* edited by Christian Reus-Smit and Duncan Snidal.
- Max Weber. 1919. "Politics as a Vocation." In *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology,* edited by H.H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills.
- Cynthia Enloe. 1990. *Bananas, Beaches, and Bases: Making Feminist Sense of International Politics,* second (2014) edition. Chapter 3 ("Nationalism and Masculinity").
- Timothy Mitchell. 1991. "The Limits of the State: Beyond Statist Approaches and Their Critics." *American Political Science Review* 85.

Week 05: The Organization of Violence

Weber just told us that the state is the entity that has a monopoly on the legitimate use of violence. But is the relationship between the state and violence really so simple? How does violence produce political order? How does the need to organize coercion shape what the state is, what it does, and how it behaves? This week examines theories that treat state formation as a response to, and a mechanism for, organizing violence.

- ⋆ Charles Tilly. 1985. "War Making and State Making as Organized Crime." In *Bringing the State Back In.* eds. Evans et al.
- Jeffrey Herbst. 2000. *States and Power in Africa*. Chapters 1 ("The Challenge of State-Building in Africa"), 2 ("Power and Space in Precolonial Africa"), and 5 ("National Design and the Broadcasting of Power").
- Margaret Levi. 1988. *Of Rule and Revenue*. Chapters 1 ("Introduction") and 2 ("The Theory of Predatory Rule").
- Deborah Avant. 2005. *The Market for Force.* Chapters 2 ("Private Security and the Control of Force") and 3 ("State Capacity and Contracting for Security").

Week 06: Consolidating Political Authority: Institutions, Property, and Commitment

Last week we asked how the organization of coercion gives rise to political order. This week, we push further: how is that order consolidated? What distinguishes the state from its institutional competitors? What makes its promises credible? And how do institutions of protection and property become durable?

- ⋆ Hendrik Spruyt. 1994. *The Sovereign State and Its Competitors*. Parts I ("Contingency, Choice, and Constraint") and III ("Competition, Mutual Empowerment, and Choice").
- Douglass North and Barry Weingast. 1989. "Constitutions and Commitment: The Evolution of Institutions Governing Public Choice in Seventeenth-Century England." *Journal of Economic History* 49(4).
- Daron Acemoglu, Simon Johnson, and James A. Robinson. 2001. "The Colonial Origins of Comparative Development: An Empirical Investigation." *American Economic Review* 91.
- Mancur Olson. 1993. "Dictatorship, Democracy, and Development." *American Political Science Review* 87.

Week 07: Credibility and Debt

Once we've thought about credibility, it's natural to ask about manifestations of that credibility. When you think about it, debt is a pretty good example of an institutional technology based on the idea of credibility. There's a reason your credit score is related both to your previous commitments and your ability to obtain new ones. Well then, maybe you and the state have more in common than you thought.

- ⋆ David Stasavage. 2011. *States of Credit: Size, Power, and the Development of European Polities*. Chapters 1–4.
- Rebecca Spang. 2015. *Stuff and Money in the Time of the French Revolution*. Introduction and Chapters 1–2.
- Miguel Angel Centeno. 1997. "Blood and Debt: War and the Nation-State in Latin America." *American Sociological Review* 102.

- Carmen M. Reinhart and Kenneth S. Rogoff. 2010. "Growth in a Time of Debt." *American Economic Review* 100.

Week 08: The Size, Number, and Survival of States

So we find ourselves in a world of states. Some are large, some are small. Some have lasted for centuries; others blink in and out of existence.This week, we ask: why? Why are there so many states, or so few? Why are they shaped as they are? Why do some survive while others collapse? And why does any of this feel so stable—until it suddenly isn't?

- ⋆ Alberto Alesina and Enrico Spolaore. 2003. *The Size of Nations*. Chapters 1–8.
- Tanisha Fazal. 2004. "State Death in the International System." *International Organization* 58.
- Scott Abramson. 2017. "The Economic Origins of the Territorial State." *International Organization* 71.
- David Carter and Hein Goemans. 2011. "The Making of the Territorial Order: New Borders and the Emergence of Interstate Conflict." *International Organization* 65.

Week 09: A Smattering of Domestic IR

The state is not a monolith, nor is it the only actor in the international system. This week introduces some of the common "named" approaches to linking domestic politics to international relations.

- ⋆ Helen V. Milner. 1997. *Interests, Institutions, and Information: Domestic Politics and International Relations.* Chapters 1–4.
- Robert Putnam. 1988. "Diplomacy and Domestic Politics: The Logic of Two-Level Games." International Organization 42(3).
- Bruce Bueno de Mesquita, James D. Morrow, Randolph Siverson, and Alastair Smith. 1999. "An Institutional Explanation of the Democratic Peace." *American Political Science Review* 93.
- James Fearon. 1994. "Domestic Political Audiences and the Escalation of International Disputes." *American Political Science Review* 88.

Week 10: Civil Disorder

And then, you know, things fall apart. This week examines what happens when state authority breaks down and what that breakdown reveals about the nature of order itself. We explore the logic of violence in civil wars, the strategic dilemmas that prevent peace, and the state's role not as absent but as actively repressive. Alongside this, we consider the coup-civil war trap: how elite distrust and efforts to consolidate control can themselves generate large-scale conflict. The state is not just a victim of disorder: *it is often a participant, and sometimes the author.*

- ⋆ Stathis N. Kalyvas. 2006. *The Logic of Violence in Civil War*. Introduction and Chapters 1, 2, 4, and 5.
- Barbara Walter. 1997. "The Critical Barrier to Civil War Settlement." *International Organization* 51.
- Christian Davenport. 2007. "State Repression and Political Order." *Annual Review of Political Science* 10.
- Philip Roessler. 2017. *Ethnic Politics and State Power in Africa: The Logic of the Coup-Civil War Trap*. Chapters 1–4.

The International System

Now, what happens when we ask: what's going on *among* the states? Like, the name of the field includes the word "international," so we should probably talk about that. And now it has come time to do so.

Week 11: The Ontological Status of the System

We just committed our theories to systems of states, not just states. But what is a system, and how do we know when we have found it? What class of things does a system represent?[2]

- ⋆ Kenneth Waltz. 1979. *Theory of International Politics*. Whole shebang.

[2] I highly recommend you go back and skim some readings from Module the First right about now, especially Thomasson (2007) and Lowe (2006). It's turtles all the way down, sure, but—get this—it's also turtles *all the way up.*

- Brendan Fong and David Spivak. 2018. *An Invitation to Applied Category Theory: Seven Sketches in Compositionality*. Chapter 1 ("Generative Effects").[3]

Week 12: Anarchy and Hierarchy

So we have a system of states, but what kind of system is it? What happens there? Can patterns be discerned to tell us one sort of system from another? Can we see these patterns truly systemically, or must we succumb to our reductionist urges?

- ⋆ Alexander Wendt. 1992. "Anarchy is What States Make of It: The Social Construction of Power Politics." *International Organization* 46.
- David Lake. 2007. "Escape from the State of Nature: Authority and Hierarchy in World Politics." *International Security* 32.
- Jonathan Renshon. 2017. *Fighting for Status: Hierarchy and Conflict in World Politics*. Chapters 1–5.
- Michael Barnett and Martha Finnemore. 2004. *Rules for the World: International Organizations in Global Politics*. Chapters 1–2.

Week 13: The Market System

Another big pattern in the international system is the market. What is the market, and how does it relate to the state system? Is the market a system, too? Does it compete with the state system, or complement it?

- ⋆ Robert Keohane. 1984. *After Hegemony: Cooperation and Discord in the World Political Economy*. Chapters 1–4.
- Charles Lindblom. 2002. *The Market System*. Chapters 1–2.
- John Maynard Keynes. 1917. *The Economic Consequences of the Peace*. Chapters 1–2.

[3] Look, I know this is a weird reading, but it is a really good introduction to the idea of systems and how they work. Don't panic, and don't worry if you don't understand everything. Just try to get a sense of the big picture and, what is more, *ways to see it, and at what cost.*

- Susan Strange. 1988. *States and Markets*. Chapters 1–3.
- Kim Border. "Brief Notes on the Arrow-Debreu-McKenzie Model of an Economy." Unpublished manuscript.[4]

Week 14: Systemic Change and Continuity

Once we've characterized something like the international system, it's natural to ask: how does it change? Should our ontology account for dynamics, or is it enough to describe a snapshot? What kinds of changes are possible, and what kinds are not? When discusssing evolution of a system, must we again stave off our reductionist urges, or is this *precisely* the time to succumb to them?[5]

- ⋆ Robert Gilpin. 1981. *War and Change in World Politics*. Chapters 1–6.
- Immanuel Wallerstein. 1974. *The Modern World-System*. Volume I, Chapters 1–3.
- Alexander Wendt. 2003. "Why a World State is Inevitable." *European Journal of International Relations* 9.

Week 15: Bargaining and Commitment

Finally, we consider the impact of anarchy (or other systemic properties) on the ability of states to make and keep commitments. It turns out that anarchy makes this really hard.

- ⋆ Lisa Martin. 2000. *Democratic Commitments: Legislatures and International Cooperation.* Chapters 1–4.
- James Fearon. 1995. "Rationalist Explanations for War." *International Organization* 49.
- Robert Powell. 2003. "War as a Commitment Problem." *International Organization* 57.
- Barbara Koremenos, Charles Lipson, and Duncan Snidal. 2001. "The Rational Design of International Institutions." *International Organization* 55.

[4] See the Kim Border repository.

[5] What would Lucas (1976) say about this?

Mearsheimer's Questions

It is not lost on Y.H.I. that this syllabus covers a lot of ground,[6] nor that several of the readings can be considered difficult. We've got political science, economics, sociology, philosophy, math, and history all rolled into one. Further, it is not lost on Y.H.I. that some of you may be feeling a bit overwhelmed, particularly given the quantity and density of the prose. In no uncertain terms: *you should not read every word of every reading*. Instead, you should read strategically.

My teacher Hein Goemans taught us that any political science reading should be read with five questions in mind:

1. What is the central question? Is there variation to be explained, an effect to contextualize, a puzzle to solve, or a phenomenon to understand?

2. What is the author's answer to that question? What is the main claim, the central argument, the key insight, or the core contribution?

3. What are the alternative answers? What else could explain the variation, effect, puzzle, or phenomenon? How does the author's answer compare to these alternatives? Is there a gap in the literature, or is the author simply offering a new perspective on an old question?

4. Why are they wrong? What's been left out, ignored, or misunderstood? What are the limitations of their approach?

5. Why is the author right? What evidence, logic, or insight supports the author's answer? What tools are brought to bear on the question, and do they help us to understand not just its answer but its nature?

Hein got these from his teacher, John Mearsheimer. And now Y.H.I. is passing them on to you, and you should pass them on to your students one day, too.

[6] And yet, it leaves out so much more. This is the nature of the beast. You will have to fill in the gaps yourself—this is part of becoming a scholar. *You are responsible for your own education.*