

Course information 2025-26

PS1130 Introduction to International Political Thought

General information

MODULE LEVEL: 4

CREDIT: 30

NOTIONAL STUDY TIME: 300 hours

MODE: Locally Taught, Independent Learner Route and Online Taught

Summary

The course is taught as an introduction to political ideas in the context of international relations and global politics with a focus on how the international perspective informs ideas about political institutions, political agency and the challenges of global politics. The course introduces students to the ideas, concepts and perspectives of some of the most important international political theorists on the challenges of war, violence, revolution and political change.

Conditions

Please see Programme Regulations for a list of Prerequisites, Corequisites and Exclusions.

Aims and objectives

The course is designed to:

- introduce students to some of the most important theorists of international political theory
- explain different models and approaches to thinking about political and international relations
- explore the origins, nature and uses of war in international politics
- examine and assess accounts of political and historical change and its implications for political institutions and global order
- examine and assess account of the limits and possibilities of global order
- to prepare students for further courses in international relations and political science.

Learning outcomes

At the end of this course and having completed the essential reading and activities students should be able to:

- identify and criticise the merits of different approaches to international political theory.
- explain different ways in which order might be achieved in the international realm.
- demonstrate an understanding of some of the great theorists of international political thought.
- evaluate the political challenges posed by changes in the way war is conducted.
- apply the perspectives on International Political Theory to contemporary problems such as global terrorism and international intervention.

Employability skills

Below are the three most relevant employability skills that students acquire by undertaking this course which can be conveyed to future prospective employers:

1. Persuasion and negotiation
2. Communication
3. Creativity and Innovation

Essential reading

For full details, please refer to the reading list.

Kelly, P. Conflict, War and International Relations: An Introduction to International Political Theory (forthcoming)

Brown, C. and Eckersley, R (eds) The Oxford Handbook of International Political Theory (Oxford University Press, 2018). [ISBN 9780198746928]

Boucher, D. and Paul Kelly (eds) Political Thinkers: From Socrates to the Present. (Oxford University Press, 2017) 3rd edition. [ISBN 9780198708926]

Assessment

This course is assessed by a three-hour and fifteen-minute closed-book written examination.

Syllabus

Introduction – What is International Political Theory

What is the object of enquiry and how should it be studied? What is a text, what role does context play in understanding and argument? The difference between political, theological, philosophical and historical perspectives. Why are there no women thinkers in this course? Is this a culturally 'western' canon?

Thucydides and the Birth of Realism

Thucydides in context. The struggle between Athens and Sparta and the course of the war. The 'Thucydides Trap' and the causes of conflict. Periclean Liberalism. The origins of realism. The morality of empire. Democracy and war.

Augustine of Hippo: Peace, war and the challenge of history

Augustine in context. The rise of Christianity and the collapse of the western Empire. The problem of sin. Peace, justice and authority. The two-cities and the use of violence. 'Just war' for peace. The meaning of history. Augustinianism beyond Christianity.

Machiavelli: War and Statecraft Machiavelli in context.

The teacher of 'wickedness'. Necessity and the character of politics. Virtù and Fortuna. The uses of violence and war as theatre. Republican virtue and political struggle. The rise and fall of great powers. Reason of State and the ethics of 'dirty hands'.

Hobbes: Sovereignty and the International Order

Hobbes in Context. Egoism and individualism. The state of nature and the state of war. The original contract. Sovereignty by institution and by acquisition. Sovereignty and international relations. Why no global sovereign? A society of states or a system of states. Balancing powers.

Rousseau: The International Order as the source of conflict

Rousseau in context. The critique of social contract theory. The will and republican order. Civic religion, nationalism and patriotism. Commercial society trade and conflict. The contradiction of perpetual peace. Progress and peace.

Clausewitz: The Science of War and the Modern State

Clausewitz in context. The professionalisation of war. Politics by other means. Interstate conflict as a dispute mechanism. The disciplining of war and the challenge of technology.

Lenin and Mao: War and Revolution

Lenin and Mao in context. Marx and dialectical materialism. From Marx to the practice of revolution. The vanguard party. Revolutionary agency and conflict. Class war and its consequences. From Proletarians to peasants. Revolutionary war and guerrilla war. Anti-colonial struggles.

Schmitt: Enmity and International Order

The crisis of liberal politics. The concept of the political. The friend enemy relationship. The nature and site of sovereignty. The concept of discriminating war. The nomos of the earth and international law. The partisan and politics. Liberalism and the permanent war.

Rawls: Realistic Utopianism vs Liberal Interventionism

Social Justice and the human rights. The original position and the two principles of justice. Primary goods as universal goods. A global original position and the challenge of cosmopolitanism. Political Liberalism. The law of peoples. International toleration and human rights. War and intervention.