Principles of the three traditions (theories) in IR: realism, liberalism, socialism
What is a theory?

Theories are statements of cause and effect

- Explanation
- Prediction
- Control

Scientific theories are “empiricist” and rely on observation of physical evidence: e.g., gravity

But not always the case: theories may be formulated in absence of physical evidence.
Theories about human behaviors pose difficulties for this model

- Many different variables play a role in human action
- *Assumptions matter*: these can influence data collection, method, and conclusions
- *History matters*: people act on habit, memory and norms
- *Language matters*: how we speak of something affects how we react to it
- *Culture matters*: shared understandings are important
- What we see is not always what we think we see
Social science theories can be differentiated among those that are empiricist—what people do—and those that are more concerned about meanings and actions—why they do it.

Conventional theories are strongly empiricist and rely on observable data → “What you see is what you get,” but that can be quite limited

Critical theories are strongly structural and infer meanings from signs, symbols, language, relationships, culture → What you cannot see often matters, but the existence and significance of such factors is not always evident
For whom or what are political science theories devised?

According to Robert Cox, a neo-marxist political theorist, there are two kinds of theories:

*Problem-solving*, which tacitly accepts the permanence and “naturalness” of social structures and relations, and

*Critical*, which envisages social and political transformations, and is based on an historicist approach.

Cox also argues that theory is “never autonomous but is always for someone and for some purpose.”
International relations emerged as a distinct subfield in political science after World War I. “Realism” became the riposte to the failure of what was called “idealism” (aka, international liberalism).
From the 1950s-1990s, there were three “traditions” in IR theory:

**Realism:** Realists believe that actors seek power to realize their goals.
- Power is the best means to protect, to acquire, to get others to act.

**Liberalism:** Liberals believe that actors seek to attain their self-interests.
- Interests can best be attained or protected by negotiation & trade.

**Socialism:** Socialists believe that rich actors seek to exploit poor actors.
- This is done via flows of capital, colonialism, and imperialist war.
Important concepts

Realism
- Anarchy
- Sovereignty
- Territory
- Self-help
- Balance-of-power

Liberalism
- Self-interest
- Free trade
- Division of labor
- Bargaining
- Interdependence

Socialism
- Capital and labor
- Class struggle
- Accumulation
- Imperialism
- Communism
All three traditions take the state as their focus and treat them as unitary entities.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tradition</th>
<th>Focus</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Liberalism</td>
<td>States seek to pursue their economic self-interests by negotiating and bargaining in international forums and seeking favorable investment rules: international competition; domestic growth; corporate goals</td>
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<tr>
<td>Realism</td>
<td>States seek to acquire the tools of “hard” and “soft” power in order to wield influence over others and to engage in coercion and war if necessary: international anarchy; concentrated power; desire for status</td>
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<tr>
<td>Socialism</td>
<td>States and capital seek to intervene, invest, and make rules that foster accumulation and economic power: imperialism; interests of capital; class status</td>
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Waltz is a Realist—but compare this with assumptions from classical liberalism

**Realism**
- The political world is made up of *states*, political communities occupying territory.
- There is no world government or sovereign; this is called *anarchy* (without a head).
- States are autonomous in the int’l state system and are *sovereign* over territory.
- Sovereignty implies full jurisdiction within territory and no jurisdiction outside.
- States must *monopolize* violence inside and engage in *self-help* outside, via *power*.

**Liberalism**
- The political (and social) world is made up of autonomous individuals.
- If there is no government or sovereign, people live in anarchy.
- This means each individual is the sovereign of herself and her body.
- No individual has authority or jurisdiction over any other person.
- The individual must engage in self-help via power, force and violence.
Waltz asks “why do wars happen?”

**INDIVIDUAL (1st image):** People are by human nature violent, aggressive, fearful, sinful. Changing human nature would eliminate the problem of war.

**STATE/SOCIETY (2nd image):** Some states possess a “bad character” and a propensity toward dictatorship at home and aggressive expansion abroad. Democratic and “happy” states do not fight each other.

**SYSTEM/ANARCHY (3rd image):** There is nothing to prevent war among states, no monopoly of violence, and accidents happen. World government or empire might solve the problem of interstate wars.

He identifies three possible sources of war in the literature.
Waltz Made Simpler

Character of the sovereign determines state behavior

Character of the system determines state behavior

Character of the state determines its behavior

Character of the sovereign determines state behavior
Examples of each of the three images

- **Third image**: Iran and the United both have strong, conflicting interests in the Persian Gulf and are therefore engaged in a relationship of enmity.

- **Second image**: In democracies, the people govern; in autocracies, leaders govern. There are not mechanisms for consultation and they make decisions that are not in their peoples’ interests.

- **First image**: Leaders of democracies seek peaceful relations, freedom, and economic exchange; leaders of autocracies seek power, domination and war.
Waltz's argument is a *structural* one

We (and states) are independent and autonomous agents, with free will and choice, and we can act.

But we never act in complete freedom: power (as well as social rules and conventions) constrain us in certain ways.

Sometimes these constraints not only trump autonomy, they also determine what we must do to survive: *we have no choice but to protect ourselves, perhaps with violence*
A “structure” is something that limits or constrains the possibilities of action, freedom and autonomy

- Physical structures stand in your way: you cannot walk through a wall
- Social structures can forbid certain behaviors
- Norms impel some acts and restrict others
- If something is regarded as “natural,” we think we cannot change it

Anarchy begins to appear similar to such a structure: we internalize its existence and act accordingly—or so Waltz argues
Many behaviors seen as natural are really social, so how fixed are they?

**Nature**
- Autonomous actor subject to biology, self-interested, violent, evil
- The world is an ungoverned, dangerous place in which actors must help themselves
- Failure to protect oneself, and eschewing violence, may lead to injury or death.

**Nurture**
- Socialized actor who learns to behave in certain ways under specific circumstances.
- The world is a social construction in which actors learn they are isolated individuals who must help themselves.
- Other behaviors are possible, although it is difficult to change beliefs and practices.
The idea that social structures are a result of belief and practice is called “constructivism” (and it has become the new “third tradition” in IR theory).

- **Constructivism:** We construct meanings through language, e.g., I may be laying down on a table, but this violates social practices & order.

- **Empiricism:** We deduce fixed meanings from outcomes, e.g., if I am laying down on something, it must be a bed.

- **Is existence best explained by meanings or outcomes?**

- **Things, phenomena, arrangements, practices, rituals, etc. are “real”**

- **Yet, social constructions can generate material effects, including death**

- **If we imagine a “beast” and arm against it, we can also use our weapons to kill innocent people**
This is why it is argued that we “construct” our social world.

But note: constructivism is an *analytical method*, not a theory...
Social theories are focused on the relationship between social structures and action by agents

- “Agents” engage in behaviors that are socially enabled and limited by social structures
- Social structures serve to locate agents in terms of who they are, what roles they play, and how they can behave
- Consider, again, the classroom as an illustration of agency & structure
- The “state” is an agent that acts in an international social space with its own practices & rules
- They are like “social individuals,” enmeshed in structures with rules, roles and relationships
- Some versions of realism acknowledge this point and apply forms of constructivism

Social change happens as structures are transformed
By this line of thinking, power is a social phenomenon and not merely a physical or material force or pressure.

Start with a group of actors, one of which has a “project.” How does that one get others to participate?

That actor must persuade others to join in the project, that is, it must influence the others in some fashion.

This notion is called “power”: getting others to do what you want them to do.
The most visible form of power appears as threats or applications of coercion through force

- Because we do not want to suffer injury or death, we respond to threats & force
- We do so in our own self-interest for protection
- The actor who wields more force is more likely to get others to yield
- This is why military power is so highly valued
- This calculus does not always work, but is that because not enough force was applied?
- Power is a more nuanced social phenomenon & practice
There are at least four forms of power

The most basic and visible form of power is “power over”: to force others to act as you wish.

A second form of power involves “agenda-setting”: including what is permitted, excluding what is not (but who decides the agenda?).

A third form of power rests on the authority to promulgate the rules governing action and have them obeyed.

The fourth form of power is “power with”: Foucauldian power that forms both society and the social individual.
Critical social theories are concerned about power as domination, coercion and force.

Why “critical?”

Critical theories are concerned about power, domination, and violence by dominant actors, and unpacking the assumptions and practices that “naturalize” certain power relations.

Critical theories are not merely attacks on the powerful, their policies, and hypocrisies.

Critical theories try to “free” both mind and behavior from the effects of socialization on human freedom in political, cultural, and social terms.
What does a critical social theory seek?

- **Evidence** of deeply internalized structures of domination that are not often acknowledged (e.g., class, patriarchy, sexism, racism)
- **Examination** of how such structures are naturalized through language and practice (e.g., superiority of nation, class or race; demonization of others)
- **Illumination** of the beliefs & practices that maintain structures of dominance
- **Incitement** to behavior intended to foreground structures and to lead to normative, legal and practical changes
- **Emancipation** from domination and oppression as a result
This is why we study both “international relations” & “global political sociology”

1. *International relations* (IR) addresses relations among states, and tends to diminish the role of other “actors” (corporations, NGOs, legal agencies, etc.)

2. *Global Politics* attempts to raise the profile of non-state actors and their influence, but still focuses on processes at the “international” level

3. *Global sociology* assumes that people, social groups & their beliefs and norms, structural forces, historical effects, and interests all play a role in world politics, albeit to differing degrees
Political sociology assumes that

1. People have multiple motivations for their beliefs, actions & practices
2. Meanings, culture, symbols matter
3. Social relations constrain beliefs and actions
4. Societies tend to “naturalize” that which has become customary
5. Language is the medium of structuring societies, and is a face of power
What does this mean for our study of international politics?

1. States are not identical units & act differently, but not merely due to character
2. Sociological (2\textsuperscript{nd} & 3\textsuperscript{rd} image factors matter both inside and outside of countries
3. Differences in cultures and meanings matter in terms of, meanings, goals & interests
4. Power cannot be understood in simple terms
Let’s return to the problematic of the state in international relations theory and practice and apply some social theory: how did “foreign relations” come into being?

Human beings have always been social; they could not have survived as atomized individuals.

Instinctual behaviors and new skills started to be taught and passed on from one generation to another.

Foreign relations came into being.

Groups of humans split up & began to mark off territories as well as to trade goods & women.

As groups grew larger, they began to devise rules to interact with other groups.

Religion became the means of legitimating rules and priests enforced them.

Language made it easier to transmit rules of behavior & practice as to justify hierarchy.
The “state” became one form of large, human group—although the “state” has appeared in many different forms over human history.

How might we define “the state?”

• An ensemble of agents, agencies, institutions, practices, beliefs, behaviors that organize, order, discipline and protect a society within a specified territory or jurisdiction.

• An collective entity that acts on behalf of a self-defined “nation,” protecting it and promoting its well-being.

• A self-interested group of social and economic elites who organize domination over masses of people to generate power & extract wealth.
Those class and groups who govern have an interest in protecting what they have from others like them, whether inside or outside the state

- “States” came to recognize each other as “like units”
- They could deal with each other either via force or diplomacy
- In Europe, where the modern states first emerged, they were really extended kin groups
- Many conflicts & wars were intra-familial battles over who would rule
- Nobles and masses were mobilized to fight for their sovereigns
- But there were other modes of interaction, e.g., marriage, hostages, etc.
- All of this came to constitute sets of social rules & practices
Which brings us back to Waltz

• The image of the sovereign, autonomous state standing alone is relatively recent
• As a type of social belief and practice, however, it permits leaders to ignore complexities and to pander to domestic interests
• This is why Waltz’s realism makes for a nice theory but is not so good for policy
• That is why he admits that “the immediate causes of war are contained in the first and second images” (p. 232)
• Consider the example of US-Iranian relations
Applications: “Nuclear crisis” with Iran

1800s: Persia a pawn in the “Great Game” between Britain and Russia

Early 1900s: Persia as a source of oil for the British Royal Navy

1940s: Iran invaded and occupied by Allies after overtures to Nazi Germany

1950s: Government overthrown after nationalization of Anglo-Iranian Oil Co.

1960s: Western-supported Shah tries “White Revolution,” alienates subjects

1970s: Shah becomes an oil “price hawk” and alienates the West

1979: Islamic Republic is established and promises Shi’ia-Islamic revolution

1980s: Iran-Iraq war and “dual containment” by the United States
What would the “Great Traditions” say?

**Realism**
- Iran is in a “dangerous” ’hood; nukes offer power, status, deterrence. But an Iranian nuke could be a threat to other states and should be prevented.

**Liberalism**
- Iran is an important trading partner; nukes could disrupt trade. Safer for everyone to negotiate away the nukes.

**Marxism**
- Iran cannot be allowed to develop an independent capability to produce nuclear goods. Better to maintain dependency via deal-making.
International class analysis of these relations

Iran has long occupied a “lower class” position in the international division of labor, supplying oil to the West while being denied any access to power despite its wealth.

The crises of the 1970s (Vietnam, oil, détente) led to Iran’s role as “policeman in the Persian Gulf,” using its oil revenues to buy US weapons which helped support the US economy.

The Iranian Revolution represented a rejection of this subordination, but Iran still lacked the power and technology to reduce its need for oil revenues and economic relations.

Nuclear research provides one possible pathway out of oil sales dependency on the West as well as technological trade options.
Feminist analysis of the conflict

Colonial-capitalist powers have treated Persia-Iran as a bridge-buffer-resource to be occupied, colonized, subordinated to imperialist domination.

This is manifest not only in Iran’s treatment as a Great Power pawn but also in the characterization of Iranians as “emotional” and Western projects to “save” Iranian women from dominating Iranian men.

The unpredictable, irrational, and emotional Guardian Council and President cannot be trusted to “play with nukes” in a rational and masculine fashion.
Post-colonial analysis of the conflict

Persians-Muslims were subordinated to a British system of beliefs and practices that posited a need to “civilized” and Anglicize colonized peoples.

This was often articulated through a system of indirect political rule but direct cultural intervention by missionaries and other colonial agents.

The Shah sought to further Westernize Iranian society, but domestic sub-altern resistance led to a rejection of his programs and the Islamic Republic of Iran.

The current “nuclear order” recapitulates the distinction between the “civilized,” who can have nukes, and the “others,” who cannot.