

POE317 Introduction to Contemporary Strategic Studies.

“This course examines the central problem of strategic studies, namely how actors conceive of, and employ force to achieve political objectives, specifically how competition can lead to violence. Students will gain a deeper understanding of the application of IR theory, with emphasis on the realist approach to the utility and employment of force. Using a variety of analytical techniques, students will interpret contemporary events and trends. Learning Outcomes are to compare explanations for violent conflict, employ qualitative and quantitative methods to understand contemporary events and trend, formulate explanations using key concepts and contrast competing realist theories.”

Professor McKay: “I will ask the NEPDP students to complete a reading to support the bridging between the two (116→317) to lay down a couple of important points: (1) positivist versus post-positivist theories; (2) how IR and strategic studies employ theory. I can catch them up on realist theory within the ambit of the course.”

Here’s my simplified introduction as an instructor in POE116

Positivism in the social sciences, especially international relations (IR)

- positivism says that there is an objective reality out there, which can be measured and studied. The concepts of a military balance of power, strategic nuclear balance, and even friends and enemies are all taken to be objective. Positivism is related to the so-called Realist school in international relations, which emphasizes coercive power. I add “so-called”, because people tend to assume that the Realist school must be “realistic” and that may not be the case. Words are often used to situate arguments. Hard-headed rational Realists are contrasted with woolly-headed unrealistic “Idealists” who expect states to abide by rules and play nicely. But most state interactions follow rules and abide by international law (think of trade and economic relations). So we have a balance of hard power governed by so-called Realist assumptions, and soft-power, rules-based interactions governed by Liberal Internationalism (“liberal” in this case refers mainly to the idea of international trade and free-market capitalism).

Post-positivism rejects the idea that empirical observation can be applied to the social sciences. Not all rejection of Realist theory or scepticism about positivism rejects empiricism. For example, you can believe that reality is subjective, but still open to empirical investigation. How many Americans think that Canada poses a threat to the US? That’s an empirical question about a subjective judgement. Does Canada pose a threat to the US? That is a positivist question, which can be reframed as a constructivist one.

Constructivism says that we create the world we live in. Governments choose what issues to “securitize” – who are our friends? who are our enemies? is immigration a strategic threat or an opportunity? States and governments have some influence over how the international order works, but can’t control it unilaterally, even if they are a big power. One view, then, is that we have a Constructivist choice between Realism and Liberal Internationalism, and we choose to be Liberal Internationalists with friends, and so-called Realists with those we identify as enemies.