

Chapter 2

Theory in Practice: How to Analyze the World

Theories are tools for analyzing the world. This section of the website contains a selection of case-studies related to the chapters in the textbook. What follows is both a general preface to the case-studies and a suggestion for a case-study in relation to chapter 2.

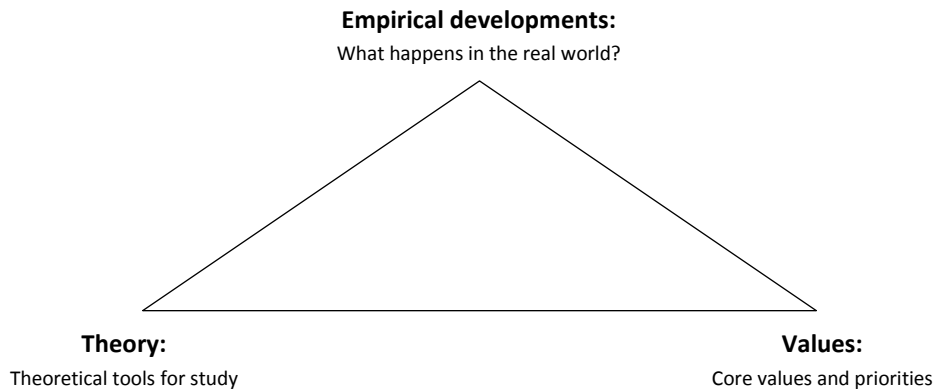
We study the world in order to come up with answers to important questions about the conditions under which we live as human beings: what are the prospects for war and peace, for conflict and cooperation? Why are some people rich and others poor? Who benefits from the way in which the current international order is set up? How do we understand the strategies and policy moves of state leaders? Can it be justified that sovereign states look after themselves and their own people first? Should they care more about the fate of mankind as a whole?

There are a thousand questions about international relations out there; we get a sample selection of them every day in the newspapers. Which questions are the most important ones - those really worthy of further study? The newspaper surely will not tell us in a way we feel we can completely trust - according to some newspapers the most important thing on the world's agenda is where some popstar spent last night with whom. We may discuss the problem with relatives and friends and the next-door neighbour, but we know from experience that we will frequently be in deep disagreement with all of them concerning what the important questions are and how we should answer them.

This is where theories come in. Theories organize the world in certain ways; they focus on what is important and downplay what is unimportant. Theories therefore help us get our priorities right by zooming in on the important questions. Furthermore, theories help us organize our knowledge about the important questions in ways which help us to formulate answers to them.

Theories can thus be of great help, but they cannot solve all our problems. Most importantly, they cannot tell us which theory to use, to prefer over other theories. We may think of ways to identify the best theory, but there is no objective way of choosing the best. It will always depend on our personal values and political priorities. Each theoretical tradition, as they are presented in the following chapters, is based on certain values and giving priority to a certain set of questions about the world. By picking a certain theoretical tradition, we accept, at least for the moment, that the values and questions emphasized by the chosen theoretical tradition are important. But having completed our analysis, we may have changed our minds and in our next analytical endeavour we may choose another theory. So analyzing the world with the lenses provided by different theoretical traditions is really a constant dialogue between three components: what goes on out there in the real world; the theoretical tools we use for our study; and the values and priorities upon which these tools are based. The interplay is sketched in Box 2.17.

Box 2.17 The research triangle



The case-studies that follow will focus on the interplay between the theory corner and the empirical corner: once we have selected a certain theory, how do we put it to use in the analysis of the real world? At the same time, we also aim to demonstrate how some theories (most notably the International Society approach) are much more open to value questions than other theories.

Assignments

1. What do you think are the three most important problems in the world today? Write them down.
2. Having made your choice, consider carefully to which extent your considerations were influenced by the three elements of the research triangle: was it theory, was it values, or was it empirical developments that was most important for you?

Case Study: The Grand Theories of International Relations

Somo Publishing has made a video series called "Theory in Action", where they interview top international relations theorists and ask them to explain various IR theories using easy and understandable terms. Watch the videos and discuss the following questions:

- Which are the grand theories of IR?
- What do the different theories focus on?
- Are the theories in opposition to each other or can they be combined?

Videos:

Theory in Action: Realism

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UnKEFSVAiNQ>

Theory in Action: Liberalism

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tZbDMUaqwE8>

Theory in Action: Constructivism

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kYU9UfkV_XI