

Encounters with Modernity in International Relations: theoretical, historical and political perspectives

Convenors

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Workshop description

Discussions of ‘modernity’ have been central to a variety of strands of (re)thinking the international. A fundamental concept in traditional social theory of authors like Marx and Durkheim, it has also entered IR theorizing as one of the organizing categories for our objects of study. Thus, in traditional narratives about the discipline, modernity started with the appearance of the sovereign state and the international system, marking the boundaries of IR properly understood. Modernity has also taken hold of critical approaches broadly understood: for authors like Walker (1992), the division between inside/outside was the fundamental marker of both the international and of modernity, making them coextensive. Similarly, modernity plays a crucial role in post- and de-colonial approaches (Shilliam 2015). On the one hand, these scholars have pointed out the binary of modern/traditional as underlying colonial oppression. On the other hand, they have also sought to theorise structures of oppression through specific periodizations as fundamentally modern, be it through concepts such as modernity/coloniality (Mignolo 2011), or racial capitalism (Go 2021).

The aim of the workshop is to focus on the concept of modernity in IR in order to interrogate further the different conceptualizations at work within the discipline, the different politics involved in invoking modernity and the function of spatio-temporal orderings in understanding the international. The workshop is intended as a space to bring together different conversations and analytical lenses that currently focus on ‘modernity’ and the role of specific temporalities in IR but do not normally interact with one another.

Workshop structure and list of contributors

Session I. Modernity and Social Theory in International Relations

The papers in this section will seek to unpack the role of ‘modernity’ as a category in social thought and IR theory. Kessler focuses on the relationship between capitalism and modernity, Yildirim the relationship between liberalism and modernity and Çapan looks at the relationship between the international and modernity through the lens of spatio-temporal fixities.

- Oliver Kessler (University of Erfurt), Modernity and the Quest for Capitalism
- Anil Yildirim (University of Exeter), Inapplicability of Liberal Modernity, Whose Life?

- Zeynep Gülsah Çapan (University of Erfurt), Interrogating the ‘the’ of the modern international

Session II. Pre-modern and Modern in Core IR concepts

The papers in this session question the separation between pre-modern and modern and how modernity is mobilised in historical narratives. The contribution by Costa Lopez looks at how the designation of a break between the modern and medieval orders the international and the concept of international order. de Carvalho and Leira interrogate how modernity orders our understanding of the territorial state and its implication for the reproduction of the territorial trap in IR whereas Mukoyoma provincialises these dynamics with a focus on Early Modern Japan.

- Julia Costa Lopez (University of Groningen), ‘The medieval, the modern and international order’
- Benjamin de Carvalho and Halvard Leira (NUPI), ‘Modernity and the Territorial State in International Relations’
- Naosuke Mukoyama (University of Tokyo), "Modern Sovereignty Revisited: The Case of Early Modern Japan."

Session III. Modernity and Europe

The notion of modernity is closely tied to that of Eurocentrism. The papers in this session seek to interrogate the role that specific spatiotemporal fixities and notions of modernity still serve in the context of contemporary EU governance. Vos discusses the way modernist narratives pervade EU governance and Herborth interrogates the temporal assumptions behind the concept of strategic autonomy.

- Renske Vos (Vrije Universitat), ‘Death of a Beginning: Unfixed Endings in EU Governance’
- Benjamin Herborth (University of Groningen), ‘How Europe cannot see the world: Strategic autonomy and historical blind spots’

Session IV. Global Modernities

This section focuses on mobilization of modernity as a political category globally and its analytical and political consequences. Zarakol explores the absence of nature from our discussion of modernity whereas Han and Hsiu explore the way modernity has worked within the case of China.

- Ayse Zarakol (University of Cambridge), Why did we forget about nature?
- Yang Han (University of Oxford) - Why should Postcolonial International Relations Abandon the Black-White Dichotomy?: Recentring Modernity in Chinese Practitioners’ Racialisation of Africa and the West in the 21st century
- Annie Hsiu (University of Oxford), ‘Towards a Relational Reconceptualization of Modernity, Empire, and the Nation-State in the Early Twentieth Century: Methodological Proposals and Takeaways from Studying the Case of China’