Part I

Course information

Teaching assistants  Mariya Grinberg (mgrinberg@uchicago.edu) and Asfandyar Mir (asfandyar@uchicago.edu), both Ph.D students in the Department of Political Science.

Lecture time and location  Mondays 3:00-5:50pm in Public Policy 142.

Section time and location  To be announced

Admission  Priority will be given to Harris master’s students, followed by graduate students from other departments. Undergraduates should take my Political Economy of Development class (sorry, no exceptions).

Prerequisites  There are no formal prerequisites for this class, but non-Harris students should have a background in economics, statistics, and basic game theory. I have designed this class to be a complement to James Robinson’s Why Nations Fail class. Thus students can receive credit for both. Nonetheless, the themes are overlapping and so I slightly discourage people from taking both classes unless international development and conflict is your specialty.

What this course is about

Most countries in the world have been independent for about 50 years. Some are peaceful and have prospered, while some remain poor, war-torn, or both. What explains why some countries have succeeded while others remain poor, violent, and unequal?
Moreover, fifty years on, a lot of smart people are genuinely surprised that these countries’ leaders have not been able to make more progress in implementing good policies. If there are good examples to follow, why haven’t more countries followed these examples into peace and prosperity?

Finally, we see poverty and violence despite 50 years of outside intervention. Shouldn’t foreign aid, democracy promotion, peacekeeping, and maybe even military intervention have promoted order and growth? If not why not, and what should we do about it as citizens?

This class is going to try to demystify what’s going on. There are good explanations for violence and disorder. There are some good reasons leaders don’t make headway, bureaucrats seem slothful, and programs get perverted. The idea is to talk about the political, economic, and natural logics that lead to function and dysfunction.

To understand the politics of weak states in the last 50 years, we are going to start with some theory and history. We need a theory of violence, and theories of how states, institutions, and societies develop to curb violence. And we want to look at the development of Western nations, and their impacts on the world, over a wide sweep of history.

We will also talk about policies, and how order and development can be fostered. I can’t tell you what specific programs or reforms to focus on, or how to implement them. What I can do is help you to understand some of the big ideas about why some paths lead to success or failure, as well as why the best plans so often go awry—ideas that surprisingly few development practitioners ever acquire.

I designed this course to give students an appreciation for big ideas and theories in comparative politics, international relations, political economy, sociology, geography, and development economics. This class involves reading a lot of material, and building your conceptual and historical sense of development and politics.

This is a global class, but a slightly unbalanced one. A lot of the examples are going to draw on Africa and Latin America, with a good deal on historical European and U.S. development, plus some material on the Middle East and Asia—an ordering determined largely by my knowledge and ignorance.

I won’t have the concrete policy answers in many cases. Actually, no one does, and one of my big aims in this class is to help you learn enough and think critically enough to know why everyone with a clear solution is wrong, and why “peace-building” and “development” are the hardest things in the world. There is no single answer. But there are some principles to finding the right answer in the right situation, and history to learn from. That’s what you’re signing up for in this class.

Grading

Note: The grading criteria could change depending on the final size of the class, and I will finalize the criteria by April 3, 2017.

There is a simple way to get a good grade in this course: read the readings. All of the grading is designed to incentivize you to read and understand the material. The reason I do this is that I think reading and writing are the main way we all change how we understand the world and influence others. Virtually every reading in this course is one that deeply influenced my own perspective.

Lecture attendance (10%) Your TA will circulate an attendance sheet during class. You will not be penalized for missing one or perhaps two lectures, since everyone falls sick or has other obligations.
Wikipedia assignments (20%) Twice during the semester you will update the quality of academic social science in Wikipedia, by integrating required and recommended readings into relevant Wikipedia articles. Typically, for each assignment, a few sentences or short paragraphs that integrate the insights from 2–4 articles is sufficient. We will discuss the assignment in section or regular class.

Take-home midterm due April 24 (30%) On April 3 I will distribute a list of up to 6 short essay questions that may appear on the midterm. On April 21st I will tell you which 2–3 of these essay questions compose the midterm. Original insights will be rewarded the most, and so you are encouraged to study and prepare independently. You will need to hand in an electronic copy of these questions to your TA before class on Monday April 24. Students, not TAs, are responsible for ensuring proper electronic delivery. The late penalty is one grade level per day, starting from the beginning of class. Sickness or other late excuses must be accompanied by a doctor’s note or similar.

Take-home final exam (40%) In the 7th or 8th week of classes I will distribute a list of up to 10 short essay questions that may appear on the final. On the evening before the registrar schedules our final exam, I will send you a list of 4–6 essay questions to complete for the final. The final will be due at midnight the day of the scheduled final exam. Hence you have at least 24 hours to complete the exam, rewarding advance preparation of all the questions. Original insights will be rewarded the most, and so you are encouraged to study and prepare independently. You will need to hand in an electronic copy of these questions to your TA before midnight on the day of the registrar-scheduled final exam. Students, not TAs, are responsible for ensuring proper electronic delivery. The late penalty is one grade level per day, starting from the beginning of class. Sickness or other late excuses must be accompanied by a doctor’s note or similar.

Part II
Weekly schedule and readings

This is a reading-intensive course. Each week I assign about four book chapters or papers, and you should read them all before attending class. All are downloadable online through UChicago’s network or from home on UChicago’s VPN. The book chapters that are not on the Internet have Dropbox links. Please let me know if any links are broken and I will fix them.

“Additional readings” are not required, but I’ll often discuss a key idea or concept in the lecture. I list them here for your reference and future reading. You are not responsible for reading these readings, but the ideas we discuss in class are testable.

1 The demand for order

- Farrell, Henry. 2015. “Dark Leviathan: The Silk Road Might Have Started as a Libertarian Experiment, but It Was Doomed to End as a Fiefdom Run by Pirate Kings.” Aeon, February.


Additional reading


• Barry Weingast on the Violence Trap. EconTalk podcst. August 2013.

• Wikipedia, “Anarchy (international relations)”


• Hobbes, Thomas. 1651. “Leviathan”
2 Why fight at all?


Additional reading


3 Order through states

- Chapter 1 of Dipali Mukhopadhyay. 2014. “Warlords, strongman governors, and the state in Afghanistan.” Cambridge University Press. (A Kindle version of Chapter 1 is available on Amazon for free by clicking on “Send a free sample”)

Additional reading

- Wikipedia on Bureaucracy, Rational-legal authority, and Environmental determinism


4 Order through institutions

• Monty Python and the Holy Grail, “The Annoying Peasant”


Additional reading


5 Order from societies

• Blog post by Tabarrok, Alex. 2015. “The Ferguson Kleptocracy,” Marginal Revolution (blog post, March 5).


Additional reading


• Daron Acemoglu and James A. Robinson. 2015. “Paths to Inclusive Political Institutions”


• Paul Robinson on Cooperation, Punishment and the Criminal Justice System, EconTalk Episode with Russ Roberts, August 31, 2015.


• De Tocqueville, Alexis. 1840. “Democracy in America.”


6 The origins and politics of today’s weak states

• Chapters 2 and 8 of Migdal, Joel S. 1988. “Strong societies and weak states: state-society relations and state capabilities in the Third World.” Princeton University Press.


Additional reading


• Chapter 2 of Samuels, David J. 2012. “Comparative Politics.” Pearson Higher Education. (especially second half of chapter on late state development)


7 Order through armed intervention?


Additional reading


8 State building without war (aid, good governance, and taxes)


Additional reading


• Mwenda, Andrew. Africa and the Curse of Foreign Aid (Video)


• Nunn, Nathan, and Nancy Qian. 2014. “U.S. Food Aid and Civil Conflict.” American Economic Review.


• Podcast with Binyavanga Wainaina: “The Ethics of Aid: One Kenyan’s Perspective” (or see transcript)


• Gordon, Roger and Wei Li. 2005. “Tax Structures in Developing Countries: Many Puzzles and a Possible Explanation”


9 Fostering institutions and democracy


Additional reading


10 Seeing like a state (or not)


Additional reading


• Easterly, William. 2006. “The white man’s burden: why the West’s efforts to aid the rest have done so much ill and so little good.” Penguin Group USA.


