

Theoretical foundations

The Diploma Programme global politics course draws on multiple disciplines in the social sciences. Many theories and analytical approaches have been put forward to further debates in these disciplines. Consequently the course is rich in potential theoretical foundations. Some examples of theoretical foundations that are likely to be helpful throughout the course are provided below; however, different or additional foundations may be relevant depending on the issue at stake.

While the key concepts help students understand interrelated big ideas behind specific political issues, theoretical foundations give students some alternative interpretations of these big ideas advocated by various camps of political debate across time and space. Theoretical foundations, perhaps more so than the key concepts (which aim to capture the essence of a particular aspect of political life) are contextual: they are a product of the circumstances in which, and purposes for which, they were developed, and they evolve. Consequently, only the very central elements of each suggested theoretical foundation are given below.

| Theoretical foundation | Explanation |
|--------------------------|--|
| Realism | Realists in global politics view the world in competitive terms. In a realist view, global politics is dominated by states acting in their own self-interest, prioritizing, first and foremost, national security. Relations between states are heavily influenced by the amount of power they have. |
| Liberalism | Liberals in global politics have a more cooperative view of the world. In a liberalist view, a host of actors influence outcomes in global politics and share a primary concern for justice, liberty and equality. |
| Capitalism | The economic theory of capitalism is the dominant ideology of production, exchange, distribution and consumption in the modern world, according to which the basis of resource allocation is the generation of profit. Although there are various interpretations of how political decision-making should be involved in regulating the operation of the profit motive, all models of capitalism agree that the generation of profit is necessary for economic growth and maintenance of the global system, and generally conducive to development. Neoliberalism is a strand of capitalism that advocates minimum political interference in the market mechanism. |
| Critical theories | “Critical theories” is an umbrella term for theoretical foundations that critique one or more major aspects of other theoretical foundations, the current world order and/or ways of organizing life. Examples of critical theories include communitarianism, constructivism, feminism, Marxism, post-colonialism and environmentalism. |
| Relativism | In the context of global politics, the ethical theory of relativism suggests values to be culturally and individually determined. In a relativist view, global agreements on the most fundamental aspects of human life are hence difficult to achieve. |
| Universalism | In the context of global politics, the ethical theory of universalism puts forward the notion of a universal human nature that transcends traditional boundaries of identity. In a universalist view, universal values are therefore possible. |

Different theoretical foundations offer competing interpretations of reality. Consequently, the list above and any other potential theoretical foundations are much more complex constructs than what can be summarized in brief explanations. When using theoretical foundations to help frame debates in global politics, the following kinds of questions might be helpful in understanding, comparing and contrasting them.

- Which key concepts are central to this theoretical foundation?
- According to this theoretical foundation, who are the most important actors in global politics?
- Through the lens of this theoretical foundation, what would a “good” society look like?
- According to this theoretical foundation, what motivates human behaviour?
- What view of progress does this theoretical foundation propose?

Given the breadth and depth of any particular theoretical foundation, it needs to be emphasized that theoretical foundations are intended, first and foremost, to structure learning and to contextualize, and offer historical background on, the key concepts and political issues discussed. Teachers should be wary of overdoing this aspect of the course.