# POLS 318: Theories of IR
## Lecture 2 (08.25.2020):
## Basics of Theory Construction

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Quick review
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Introduction
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Theory - the Basics
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Judging Theories
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Extra Material
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# Overview

## Review

WHAT WE COVERED LAST MEETING?

- Syllabus, course procedures.
- Task 1.

Questions?? Email me!

# Why Theory?

**The puzzle: why do we need theories?**

- Understand past/current events:
  1. Why did World war I began?
  2. What led to the establishment of NATO?
  3. Why did the Soviets invade Afghanistan?

- Facts, historical events and their limitations.

- Theory vs. History.

- Theory $\rightarrow$ past, present and future.

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# "Everybody uses Theory"

# Why Theory?

IRAN NUCLEAR PROGRAM

## Iran Nuclear Program

**Main Question: Nuclear technology - Military or Civilian?**

FACTS

- Nuclear facilities (some secret).
- Thousands of centrifuges, enriching uranium.
- 'Fatwa' against nuclear weapons.

EXPLANATIONS

- Power - regional deterrent.
- Religion - martyrs.
- Supplant energy shortages.

- Scientific rules for studying reality.

## Scientific Theories

**Definitions**

- Simplified representation of reality.
- Explain empirical phenomenon.
- Conditions for preventive war? Encourage economic growth?

**Beyond the social context**

- Theory in natural science.
- Objective - deductive theory (general).

# Scientific Theory

COMPONENTS

1. Assumptions.

2. Logic.

3. Predictions.

**Assumptions**

- The building blocks of theory.

- Simplifying conditions.

- Assumptions $\rightarrow$ Hypotheses.

- Selecting assumptions - why critical?

## Theories - a single explanation?

*One event - multiple theories*

- **Neorealism**: unitary actor assumption.
- **Bureaucratic theory**: internal dynamics between actors and state actions.

### Military Spending

- Security agencies manipulate threats.
- 'Required' spending on security.

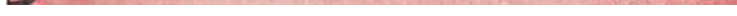- The importance of selecting assumptions.

## Testing theories

**Elements for testing**

- Variables - multiple values.
- Constants - a single value.
- Dependent variable - what we explain.
- Independent variables - explain variation in DV.

**Linking Variables**

- Causal relationships between DV and IVs.
- Hypotheses (propositions): IVs $\rightarrow$ DV.
- Hypothesis - predict DV value (past and future).

# Arms Races and War

## Arms Races and War

**Main DV**:

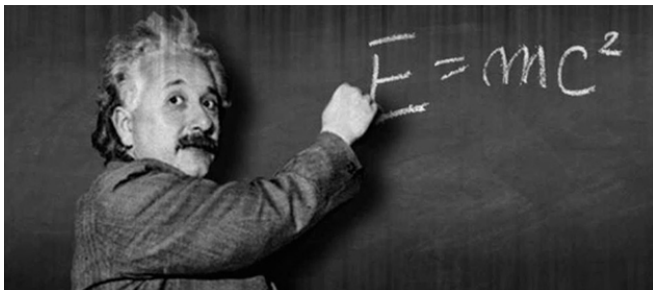- Likelihood of a country enters a war

**Common IVs**:

- Magnitude of Threat: extent of arms expenditures.
- Guns vs. Butter ratio.

**Research Proposition**:

- Increase in threat & 'Guns' → War is more likely.
- Richardson (1949).

## Types of Theories

**Also had a theory...**



- *Middle range* theories - social science is hard!
- The principle of *Parsimony*.

## How to judge theories?

EVALUATION CRITERIA

1. Evidence: support or contradict our predictions.
2. Logical consistency: theory and assumptions.
3. Outperform alternative explanations or not.

### Evidence: Territory and War

- Prediction: territorial disputes $\rightarrow$ war.
- Evidence: wars are more likely when issue is territory.
- Data $\rightarrow$ theory.

## How to judge theories?

### Logical Consistency

- Clear description: how factors lead to outcomes.
- Assumptions cannot contradict - harms prediction.
- Example: Realism
    - Power as main factor.
    - System has *Status-Quo* states?
- Challenge of logical consistency in social sciences.

### Falsifiability

- Conditions in which predictions are *Wrong*.
- Falsifiable theory $\rightarrow$ scientific.
- Religious beliefs.
- Terror groups lethality: cooperation or competition.
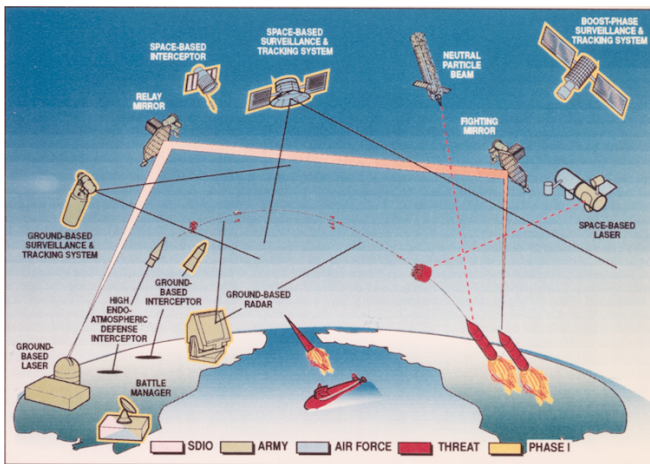
## How to judge theories?

**Competing explanations**

- *The first principle of wind walking.*
- Not so easy.
- Switching costs and likelihood of accepting change.
- IR → Predictable.

**Example: Counter-terrorism**

- Prevent radicalization by persuasion.
- Less effective - requires change of belief.

# How to judge theories?

**Wing walking among Policymakers**: Reagan SDI ('Star Wars')

# How to test theories?

- Empirical assessment: case studies.
- Vietnam war (proxy wars, cold war, insurgency, etc.)
- Inductive method: generalize a single case.
- More cases (evidence) $\rightarrow$ more confidence in theory.

**Challenges of case selection**

- Arms race and wars: World war 1&2 as cases.
- Contradictory evidence.
- **Selection bias**:
    - Use only supportive evidence.
    - Ignore refuting data.
    - No variation in DV.

## Recommended readings

More studies on theory construction:

1. Kellstedt, P. M., and Whitten, G. D. (2018). *The fundamentals of political science research*. Cambridge University Press.

2. Pollock, Philip H. (2016). *The Essentials of Political Analysis (5th Edition)*. Washington DC: CQ Press.