Research Seminar

‘Rethinking IR Theory: Liberal Internationalism and its Critics’.

By: Associate Professor Martin Griffiths, Department of International Business and Asian Studies, Griffith University

Three challenges confront International Relations (IR) theory in the twenty-first century, and the student of international relations must work within an academic field characterised by a profound lack of consensus over how best to respond to these challenges. The first challenge is perhaps the most difficult to respond to, since it concerns a set of issues that is not peculiar to the study of international relations, but arguably concern the social sciences as a whole. What kind of knowledge can we have about international relations, and what kind of knowledge ought we to seek? The second challenge is more familiar to students of international relations, since it goes to the heart of IR theory, particularly for those concerned primarily with normative concerns (evaluating international relations) rather than empirical questions (identifying the main dynamics and patterns of international relations). The sovereign state continues to be the main ‘actor’ in international relations, even if there is little consensus on how we should define this entity, and even as its form mutates in ways that we still do not clearly understand. The second challenge is not plural, however, but singular, at least conceptually. The state unites (or seeks to unite, or sometimes pretends to unite) its people as a nation. That unity, however, depends upon and in turn reinforces a basic division between insiders and outsiders, often with tragic consequences. If tragedy is unavoidable, how can its consequences be ameliorated? The final challenge is not the state in general, but a particular sovereign state, the United States of America (US). To the extent that IR theory is ‘always for someone and for some purpose’, the usual suspect is the United States. The challenge in this context is how to judge the gap between the ‘is’ and the ‘ought’ in American foreign policy, between what the United States does and what IR theory wants it to do. I claim that one particular theoretical perspective in the study of international relations, liberal internationalism, dominates the way in which IR theory has responded to each of the three challenges. And the strengths and weaknesses of liberal internationalism constitute the central and enduring great debate of IR theory. I argue that, understood in this way, we must rethink IR theory as both pluralistic and dialogical.

Martin Griffiths is Associate Professor in International Relations in the Department of International Business and Asian Studies at Griffith University. His research areas of expertise include international relations theory; US foreign policy since 1945; nationalism; theories of peace and war; and the epistemology of social science. He has just completed his latest book, entitled Rethinking International Relations Theory (Palgrave, 2010).

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N54 Room 2.02
Nathan campus
12:30-1:50pm

To RSVP, please contact Natasha Vary on (07) 3735 5322 or n.vary@griffith.edu.au no later than 5.00pm Tuesday 18 May 2010.