States and global order: history, geopolitics, and economics

PhD Course

25 hours

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Why and how do states emerge, why do political institutions develop differently across societies, and how do these differences shape inequality and global order? This course examines these questions from a long-term comparative historical perspective, drawing on cases from Europe, the Middle East, and China. It begins with the origins of states and divergent patterns of institutional development in premodern societies, before examining fiscal capacity, state consolidation, and political collapse. Particular attention is paid to the implications of institutional differences for inequality within societies and economic divergence between them. The course then considers how these historical trajectories help explain changes in international political and economic order over the past two centuries, concluding with an examination of political transformation in twentieth-century China.

By comparing competing explanations of state formation, societal organization and the interaction among polities on the global scenario, students will learn to critically evaluate historical evidence and interpretations. They will also develop a research proposal examining a historical case of state formation or the emergence and transformation of international political order.

The final assignment is a research paper proposal, which students will prepare and present in pairs. The final grade will be based on the in-class presentation (60%) and the written proposal submitted as a take-home assignment (40%). Further details about both assessment components will be provided during the first class.

Class schedule

February 22, 2027

- 10:00-12:30 Introduction: states and political order in theory and history.
- 14:00-16:30 From tribes to states: hierarchy and inequality in ancient societies.

  Suggested reading
  - Carneiro, 1970, "A Theory of the Origin of the State", *Science*, 169.

February 23, 2027

- 10:00-12:30 The historical roots of modern political institutions: clan and the city.
- 14:00-16:30 How premodern European states functioned.

  Suggested readings

- Greif, A. and G. Tabellini, 2010, "Cultural and Institutional Bifurcation: China and Europe compared", *American Economic Review: Papers & Proceedings*, 100, p.135-140.
- Greif, A., 1994, "On the Political Foundations of Late Medieval Commercial Revolution: Genoa During the Twelfth and Thirteenth Centuries", *Journal of Economic History*, 54(2), p. 271-287.

February 24, 2027

- 10:00-12:30 Fiscal capacity and political institutions: Europe and the Middle East.
- 14:00-16:30 The consequences of limited fiscal capacity: state consolidation or collapse?

  Suggested readings

  - Blaydes, L., and E. Chaney, 2013, "The Feudal Revolution and Europe's Rise: Political Divergence of the Christian West and the Muslim World before 1500 CE", *American Political Science Review*, 107(1), pp. 16-34.
  - North, D.C. and B. Weingast, 1989, "Constitutions and Commitment: The Evolution of Institutions Governing Public Choice in Seventeenth-Century England", *The Journal of Economic History,* 49(4): 803-832.
  - Sng, T., 2014, "Size and dynastic decline: The principal-agent problem in late imperial China, 1700-1850", *Explorations in Economic History,* 54, 107-127

February 25, 2027

- 10:00-12:30 Global order(s): from the *Pax Britannica* to the end of the Western hegemony.
- 14:00-16:30 Winners and losers in the second half of the 20th century.

  Suggested readings:

  - G. Alfani and A. Colli, 2025, *Among the Waves of Globalization. An Economic History of the World*, Giappichelli, chs. 9, 11, and 15

February 26, 2027

- 10:00-12:30 The Party and the State: Political transformation in twentieth-century China.
- 14:00-16:30 Student presentations.

  Suggested readings

  - Saich, T., 2021, *From Rebel to Ruler. One Hundred Years of the Chinese Communist Party*. Ch. 5.