Description

This course is available to candidates for the POLIS M.Phil. and to any other postgraduate student for whom it is a permitted option. In this course, we will explore the theme of ‘decline’ in international politics, focusing on different levels of analysis: decline of particular international actors, decline of international institutions/orders and decline/collapse of world structures. Starting with great power decline and transition, we will then move onto considering the decline of international orders and hierarchies. We will end with a discussion about the likelihood of systemic decline due to crises beyond human control such as climate change. The goal of this course option is to get students familiar with both classical and cutting edge work in theoretical, sociological and historical IR, while simultaneously engaging them in contemporary debates about urgent problems and crises in world politics.

Course organisation and expectations

In the reading lists that follow, core (i.e. compulsory) readings are separated from supplementary readings. Ideally, students will come to class having done the core readings. Supplementary readings are included for students who may want to read further on each topic and may also come in handy when you are writing the assessment essays. [Reading list will be updated up to the start of Lent Term; please make sure you have the final version of the paper guide]

The course will be taught in seminar style, meeting 1.5-2 hours each week. Regular attendance and participation are expected but not assessed. I am also giving twelve lectures for undergraduates in POL2 for LENT on complementary themes. You are welcome to attend1 these hour-long lectures as well, especially if the subject material is new to you.2

Assessment will be via a 3000-word essay at the end of the term.

1 Recordings will also be available.

2 If you come to these lectures you will hear my particular take on these themes (and some of the overlapping readings). But do keep in mind that because this is a postgraduate seminar, I still want you to engage with the readings on your own and come to class prepared to discuss your position.
**Background Reading**

The following are reference books you can consult before or during the course for contextualising the issues we will discuss in the seminars. They each have different strengths. Having at least one at hand as a reference book is recommended, especially if your background is not in IR.


**Useful websites and blogs:**

- ‘The Disorder of Things’ ([http://thedisorderofthings.wordpress.com/](http://thedisorderofthings.wordpress.com/))
- ‘e-International Relations’ ([http://www.e-ir.info/](http://www.e-ir.info/))
- There are also some good IR podcasts that you may want to check out.
WEEK 1
A world in crisis?
Many observers think that we are at a critical juncture in international politics but disagree as to the causes. Some argue that the main driver of change is a power transition between the US and China, others argue that the Liberal International Order is no longer sustainable, yet others point to larger changes, e.g. climatological, economic or demographic trends. More recently, some have argued that COVID-19 will fundamentally change our world. In this week, will get acquainted with some of these debates to frame the discussion in the coming weeks.

Core Reading:

Supplementary Reading:
WEEK II
Levels of Analysis in IR
What do we mean by the terms agent, order and system/structure? This week we learn about these terms and the ways they have been defined in IR theory. We also discuss the level of analysis problematic and its implications. The goal of the week is to help separate ongoing world political crises by level of analysis.

Core Reading:

Supplementary Reading:
WEEK 3

Decline of the US; Rise of China

To the extent IR has focused on decline, it has been at the level of agents, i.e. the decline of Great Powers. This week we learn about power transition theory, hegemonic decline and revisit debates about American decline and the rise of China. Is the US really in decline? And if so can the current levels of uncertainty in world politics be attributed to that? Do great powers always decline and rise in a predictable manner along the same trajectory?

Core Reading:


Supplementary Reading:

- Kugler, Jacek, ed. (2011) Special Issue: Power Transitions. *International Interactions* 38.5
Week 4
Decline of ‘the Liberal International Order’?
Until recently, very few in IR considered the possibility of decline regarding international orders, or at least the idea that they could decline in such a way that they would not be replaced with similar international orders. Now that the Liberal International Order seems to be in decline, many are scrambling for answers. Is the Liberal International Order in decline because of the decline of the US and/or the Rise of China and/or the Global South? Some argue that the main challenge to the Liberal International Order is from within, from populist forces in the West such as Trump or Brexiteers. And some say the Liberal International Order never really existed in the first place. This week we will cover these debates and also discuss where (if anywhere) liberal internationalism went wrong.

Core Reading:

Supplementary Reading:
• Adler-Nissen, Rebecca and Ayşe Zarakol. [Forthcoming] Struggles for Recognition: The Liberal International Order and the Merger of its Discontents. [International Organization special issue; check out the rest as well]


Week 5
Decline of ‘the West’?
One of the main features of the modern international system has been the hierarchy between the West and the non-West. We review how this emerged and why it has been so durable. Some conflate the decline of the West with the rise of China, but the two things are not the same and do not presuppose each other. We also discuss what a post-Western world may look like.

Core Reading:

Supplementary Reading:
Week 6  
**Are we facing an even bigger decline?**

In this week we consider whether the current crisis goes even deeper than the previously considered options. We look at systemic pressures driving change, e.g. climate, disease, technology and finance. Do crises in these areas signal impending structural decline in world politics?

**Core Reading:**

**Supplementary Reading:**
Week 7

Which one is it? And what is next?
This week we will bring the discussion to a close by weighing all the options together. Are we really facing some type of major ‘decline’ in world politics? If so, which one? And what will the future look like?

Core Reading:

Supplementary Reading: