

Report: **Comments**

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Course:	<b>DEBATES-INTL PEACE INTERVENTN (POLSG8823_001_2013_1)</b>
Instructor:	<b>Autesserre Severine</b>
Evaluation:	<b>A&amp;S Course Evaluations: 1 Instructor Form (spring 2013)</b>
Dates:	<b>April 30, 2013 - May 10, 2013</b>
No. of Respondents:	8
No. of Students:	10
Percent Completed:	<b>80%</b>

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**Comments on Instructor Effectiveness - Severine Autesserre**

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1. The professor was incredible, she has a genuine desire to ensure that students learn and improve. She encourages critical analysis and is very responsive to criticism if a class lesson is ineffective... I have thoroughly enjoyed my time in this class. The Professor was also incredibly adept at ensuring that all students in the class grasped the key concepts with a great deal... which in a class dealing with such complex concepts was very much appreciated

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2. Severine is a fantastic instructor, she elicits great participation from the class and is respectful of our own endeavors as scholars while keeping in mind the goals she has for our own learning. She has a light but effective touch in leading the classroom, and adeptly changes up the style of the class when needed to make it more effective. She is also very open to feedback on how to improve every aspect of the course which everyone appreciated. She is very clear on everything logistics wise and otherwise

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3. This was the most challenging class I took this semester, because I had limited background knowledge coming in. However, it is the most organized class I have ever taken (in undergrad or grad school), and the professor was very committed to making it a positive experience for all of us, which I would say she definitely achieved.

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4. Severine was an extremely motivating and engaging instructor. Not only was the substance of the course presented clearly, leaving no doubt as to how each week fit into the broader perspectives of the topics we studied, but her ability to encourage student participation, both through her energy and via several variations in the structure of the class (e.g. students leading class discussion), should set the standard for professors throughout the university. As a student, I was left without any doubt that Severine was doing her utmost to ensure that my classmates and I got as much out of the course as possible. Participating in her class was the highlight of my week this semester.

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5. The professor was extremely effective in helping me get a better understanding of complex subject matters and terminology. As a non-native speaker, I especially benefited from her ability to encourage student participation. By the end of the semester, I had gained some much-needed confidence to engage in discussions with the other graduate students.

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**Comments on readings, materials, assignments, and examinations**

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1. Good readings and very organized class that covered many topics/approaches that political scientists should be able to engage with. I think that there could be one less response paper given there is a final paper associated with the course.

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2. The progressive assessments throughout the semester lent themselves to student improvement which was supported by the detailed and constructive feedback provided by the professor. The final assessment was very well supported as a process with help given at each stage of research development.

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3. The methodology readings were perhaps a bit more than necessary.

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4. The reading list was demanding, particularly because the course ambitiously set out to cover both a large body of theoretical literature and a number of practical applications of that theory. In my opinion, it was excellently structured. I have one recommendation regarding the "classics" week. The idea to have each student read and present a classic constructivist work is excellent - the only change I would make would be to make it compulsory for each student to read every other student's written version of their presentations, to ensure that everyone became as familiar with the works as possible.

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5. Grade percentages were very appropriately distributed, in that the extensive reading we did was acknowledged and 30-40% of our grade was directly tied to our completion of the weekly course load. The emphasis on the course was the process of learning, rather than just the end result of what had been learned at the end of 14 weeks, and I think that is an excellent teaching model.

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6. It was also a LOT of work - which is great. I was happy to do it. Perhaps I would make it clear from the beginning that grad students who do take this course may want to balance their schedule accordingly. I wouldn't necessarily change the workload - the three reading reviews were great practice, and the final product was meant to be best useful for wherever you were in the program, which is also great. Perhaps the only burden was a plethora of deadlines, both electronic and hard copy, if that could be streamlined that would be great.

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### **Please comment on ways to improve the course**

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1. This course was fantastic. Ideally I think a great deal more time could be spent on the 'classics' that we don't otherwise get exposed to. That said, with only one semester it worked quite well the way it did anchoring it in a substantive question. (would be lovely to have 2 semesters, but that may be only a dream) One soln would be on the day that each person was assigned one of the classic books, to have them do a 2-5 page written summary and review and then have the class be required to read the summaries before the session.

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2. One thing that could have been very useful would be to get some feedback from the professor on our first drafts for the final paper.

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3. No need for the library session or the student presentations of books. The book that I read was useful and interesting, but I could not gain a good understanding from student presentations and posted materials.

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4. The only criticism I have was about the length of the library session... it would have been useful instead to spend this time going over more of the fundamentals and origins of constructivism. As another week to really discuss and analyse the key foundations of the course would have been beneficial whereas I found the library discussions unhelpful.

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5. See above. The only other suggestion I would make is that it could have been longer! After speaking to some of my classmates, we agreed that while the fact that the topic matter went from the purely theoretical to the practically applied was fantastic, it was a shame that we did not get to do more of both. In my opinion, the ideal scenario for this course would be that it be taught over two semesters, with one semester being devoted to theory and the other to practice - but with the important requirement that students would be required to enroll in both courses to be allowed to participate at all. This would ensure that everyone was on the same page theory-wise when doing the second-semester practice section.

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6. To me, the least useful class was week 2 on the classics. These were all fascinating foundational texts, but I learned very little from students' 10 minute presentations on each

book. I would have preferred to at least spend two weeks on these books, perhaps by cutting down on the methodology readings.

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7. Challenging, but appropriately difficult

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### **What were the best aspects of this course**

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1. The focus on analytical analysis and evaluation of the strength and weakness of different texts. The presentations run as a panel with feedback where vital in ensuring a quality paper was presented. The weeks of class facilitation where incredibly useful and challenging

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2. - The mock conference where we presented our final papers - Class discussions led by the students - Student presentations on different theoretical pieces

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3. The introduction to the core concepts of constructivism, the week on organizational culture, and the discussions of Severine's work were most interesting and intellectually stimulating.

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4. Great professor, well-structured syllabus, extremely stimulating class discussions and good variation in the structure of the class. Also, the large number of different home assignments kept me and my classmates on our feet, and ensured that everyone was basing their class participation on in-depth knowledge of the readings.

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5. This course was absolutely fantastic. I really appreciated the follow through from abstract theoretical underpinnings to applied subject matter to policy recommendation. The current offerings in the program tend to lump 'constructivism' into one group without any deeper consideration of the different types of analysis going on. This course was much, much needed exposure to the different ontological and epistemological approaches within constructivism, and how they are different or similar to more rationalist approaches. I think it is required coursework for everyone to be seriously exposed to being challenged on how they think about the world in order to become better social scientists, even if your brand of science is more on the rationalist side. Both what the theoretical drive is, and how these approaches can be rigorously applied. All too often we jump in on assumptions that we can study something without challenging first how we think the world works. This class was essential for putting that in context. There is also a great deal of interest among the grad students here on civil war and conflict issues, but we have much less coursework on the 'peacebuilding' side of that, so this was great to get a lay of the land on what is out there in the field on these issues.

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6. Learning how to engage with other approaches to studying IR including non-positivist approaches. Learning about constructivist methods - how to use them and how to critique them.

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7. Listening to my colleagues' analysis of the readings was very helpful to me, because it allowed me to consider perspectives I hadn't, prior to the class discussion. The professor also added clarifying information and additional insight when appropriate, which was helpful too.

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### **General comments**

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1. Great!

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2. Overall, a very well designed course that took me from a very low baseline knowledge of constructivist approaches to a functional level. I hope this course continues to be offered to future graduate students.

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3. Great course :)

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4. This is the best course I have taken at Columbia University. This is due in large part to the excellent performance by the professor, but also to the exciting topics that the course dealt with. It is a shame that there are not more courses on offer in the GSAS and SIPA polisci departments that take constructivist theory seriously - I firmly believe that this school of thought has more to contribute than is being acknowledged at present at Columbia. Also, I would like to point out that in spite of the fact that the vast majority of polisci teaching at this

university is based on a rational choice conception of social interaction, it was not until taking this course that I really felt I understood what this rational choice approach entails. Severine's course was an example of what I would consider the most healthy type of scholarly environment, where students are given the resources to think critically about the ontological and epistemological assumptions that underlie their work, and where such critical thinking is encouraged. It has been my experience that in other courses at this institution, especially in comparative politics, such an environment is almost completely absent - students are expected to willfully accept a particular theoretical outlook, without being given the necessary resources to reflect on the shortcomings of this outlook, and without being encouraged to or even tolerated for doing so. It may be the case that the rational choice approach is the dominant one in (American) professional social science today, but this does not mean that students should be expected to accept it implicitly and without reflection. In my opinion, such an expectation is unbecoming of a university of Columbia's standards. More course's like Severine's - including constructivist courses for both IR and CP - would serve to address these issues and, from my perspective at least, improve the quality of education being offered to polisci graduates considerably.

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5. The department absolutely must keep this class, or a similar one, available for international relations scholars. We have almost no exposure otherwise to constructivist approaches, and given the specialties of the department on security, civil war and ethnic conflict, etc., having a knowledge base in the approaches covered in this class is essential. This class is also great in simply forming great grad student thinkers - learning to be a consumer of different kinds of material, learning how to challenge these pieces on their own grounds and how to challenge more rationalist pieces that black box some of the questions constructivist scholars take head on (and visa versa). Had I not been able to take a class like this during my coursework years, I would have been gravely disappointed in my preparations as an IR scholar.

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6. The small and relicted class size was incredibly valuable as it ensured everyone a decent opportunity to contribute. I learnt so much not only from the professor but also my other colleagues. This is an important and worthwhile course within the political science department and I am grateful that I have had the opportunity to expand my knowledge outside of the traditional realist heavy IR lens

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7. This was my first seminar as a PhD student at Columbia and I enjoyed it more than any other class I have attended so far.

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**If you received instruction for this course by another person who was not listed (or evaluated) above, please provide comments here**

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1. NA

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**Location of classroom evaluated**

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1. IAB 5A - the classroom was smelly and poorly ventilated which made it hot and stuffy.

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2. The location was great, but the physical condition of the class could have been better. A classroom with windows could work better for an advanced graduate seminar class. It can be quite exhausting at times to have class discussions for two hours without any light or fresh air.

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3. IAB 5th floor

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4. IAB 501

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5. This classroom was absolutely awful. No windows, no light, stuffy, hot and noisy. Please do not make people try and learn in that classroom again.

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6. No problems

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**Please indicate your declared major or majors (if applicable)**

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1. Political Science
2. International Relations
3. Human Rights
4. International Relations
5. Human Rights Studies M.A.

**Course specific items**

**Which readings were the most useful?**

1. Section on methods, Finnemore, Barnett,
2. I honestly thought all selected readings were very useful.
3. Barnett and Finnemore - International Organizations
4. Autesserre, Duffield, Barnett
5. "The Basics" during the first few weeks, Finnemore, Barnett, and the whole practice turn/ethnographic work sections
6. At War's End

**Which readings were the least useful?**

1. Klotz, Wilmer
2. Wilmer; Weeden
3. -
4. Methodological stuff (from Part II of the course, I believe)
5. Trouble with the Congo