Practitioners and theorists of international affairs are both confronted to a challenge, whose relevance has today gained considerable importance. Predicting the future has always been one of the goals and constraints of the “art of politics”. Since the early Greeks who established rules on what should be the role of “oracles” to prediction companies and business consultants whose task is to provide information to policy-makers that elaborate their future oriented strategies, mastering uncertainty has always had a great appeal in power circles (let alone when political leaders consult astrologists…). From a theoretical standpoint, the stakes are also very high. Explaining the past is the traditional goal of social sciences. However, some scholars argue that “anticipating the future” is also a legitimate purpose for social sciences, whether it is sociology, economy or international relations aiming at establishing laws of behavior and structural patterns that both explain the past and could predict the future.

This seminar will discuss how theory and practice are intermingled. It will focus on the role – whether useful or misleading – of predictive ideas in international affairs, discussing the models used by prediction entrepreneurs, i.e. the modern oracles consulted by private companies and governments.
Course requirements

Research paper, 50% of the grade\(^1\). 10-15 pages due by December 9th. One-page proposal stating problem to be addressed, provisional thesis and bibliography due by November 4th.

Oral presentation\(^2\) of the required and recommended readings. 30% of the grade.

Class participation and attendance. 20% of the grade.

Introduction: Oracles in Politics – Historical Overview

Session 1 *Oracles in Ancient Rome and Athens*

Wednesday September 23rd

Introduction: forecasting from a historical perspective.
Who are the “oracles” in ancient Athens and Rome?
What are their relation to power?
What can we learn from this past experience?


Session 2  *Uncertainty, Luck and Predictions in Modern and Contemporary Politics*

\(^1\) The paper will select one or few salient issues related to forecasting and predictions. The paper will either select an empirical case study, for example forecasting at Rand corporation a historical analysis, prediction in war making in the Middle East etc… Or it can raise more theoretical issues. It can question the possibility of forecasting in international affairs, discuss the epistemological value of a chosen forecast…

\(^2\) Each week one or two student(s) will present the required reading of the session (and will bring some elements from the recommended readings), will discuss the text(s), highlight the novel elements they bring into the debate, eventually point out their flaws. The text marked in RED is the mandatory reading that has to be presented and discussed. This presentation ought not to be simple summary of the text, it a critical analysis of the views of the author. The various texts are extremely accessible. Several of them have been scanned and will be sent by email. Many are available through the ScPo library website (JSTOR etc…).
Mastering uncertainty is a core political issue that key political philosophers have elaborated in their work. Taming luck is one of the tasks of the sovereign. What is the definition and the status of luck, its relation with predictions and previsions? Luck and decisionism.


**Session 3 Risk Aversion in Democracies and the Precautionary Principle**

**Wednesday October 7th**

A (global) risk society? The precautionary principle in contemporary democratic societies.


Is there such a thing as futurology? 
Futurology

**Part I: Predictive Theories**

**Session 4 Prediction in the Social Sciences**

**Wednesday October 14th**
The epistemology of forecasting in the social sciences
Are social sciences valid forecasting tools?

John Freeman, Brian Job « Scientific Forecasts and Predictions: Problems of Definition and Epistemology », *International Studies Quarterly*, vol. 23 n. 1, 1979, p.113-143


Sociology: Daniel Bell’s theory on capitalism and modernity:


Economics:


**Session 5  Demographics as a Key to the Future?**

**Wednesday October 21st**

**Guest speaker: Emmanuel Todd (INED):**

"Anticipating the fall of the USSR and the US decline"

The history of demographics
Demographers’ historical record

Session 6 *Anticipation and Forecasts in International Relations*
*Wednesday October 28th*

Why is the discipline of IR so much concerned about making forecasts?
The divide between the different schools of thought

Forecasting in international relations:

More on the USSR:

Game Theory and Computer Science Applied to IR:

Session 7 *Optimist vs. Pessimists in the Security Realm*
*Wednesday November 4th*

Guest Speaker: Bruno Tertrais (Fondation pour la Recherche Stratégique),
Applying IR to security and policy issues
How do expert think?
The rationality of predictions in the security arena

The Delphi method, the RAND report.
http://www.rand.org/pubs/research_memoranda/RM5888/

War games and gaming:

Optimism and pessimism:


Part II: “There is No Business such as Prediction Business”

Session 8 Forecasters as an Epistemic Community?
Wednesday November 18th

What is an epistemic community?
Forecasters as scientists, members of an epistemic community?


What is a normative forecast?


The session will be organized around a presentation of the journal The International Journal of Forecasting and the discussion will follow on a selection of articles, http://www.forecasters.org/ijf/

Among the many companies that do forecasting:
Session 9 Think Tanks as Oracles  
Wednesday November 25th


A careful study of the different security and economy think tanks and their predictive function.  
A special attention will be paid to RAND, see the Delphi Method.  
Who does what? And what is the impact of think tanks predictions?

Predictions on proliferation.
Differences, overlapping and opposition between academia and think tanks.
Who are the optimists, the pessimists (among think tanks)? Why?


Session 10 The Futures Market  
Wednesday December 2nd

Guest speaker: Emile Servan-Schreiber (Newsfuture.com): "The Future of the Futures Markets"

The history of political betting  
What are the social, political, legal and ethical issues involved?  
The pros and cons  
The social utility of futures markets


The Foresight Exchange Prediction Market: www.ideosphere.com


Session 11  Gurus, Wizards and Wall Street
Wednesday December 9th

Guest Speaker: Ariel Weil (Moody's): "Financial Self-Fulfilling Prophecies"

The traits of contemporary oracles
Is forecasting inherent to finance?
Is finance performative?

Magical thinking and beliefs: Jerzy Kozinski’s novel, Being There. See also the movie with Peter Sellers, http://www.geocities.com/~cheshyre/being.html


Are finance gurus reliable? On what knowledge are their predictions based? The insider’s critique, Nassim Taleb: http://www.fooledbyrandomness.com/


**Session 12 Predictions in Environmental Politics**
**Wednesday December 16th**

Climate change and scientific predictions
Who says what, why and how?
The role of environmental predictions in policy making

- Thomas Schelling, « Climate Change: The Uncertainties, the Certainties, and What They Imply About Action »
- Kesten C. Green, « Global Warming: Forecasts by Scientists versus Scientific Forecasts »
- Jagadish Shukla, “Monsoon Mysteries”
- Peter Cox and David Stephenson, « A Changing Climate for Prediction »