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The state, personified: Whither IR's contested subject

Wednesday 3 June 2026 15:00 (1h 30m)

One of two panels reflecting on the concept of state personhood 25 years after the seminal forum in Review of International Studies on the ontological status of the state, this panel offers critical interrogations and novel formulations of IR's contested subject. While the idea that states may be usefully understood as unitary, rational actors is at the very heart of the discipline of International Relations (IR), descriptions of states as affective, phenomenological persons remain controversial despite the productive theoretical engagement that this assumption has generated. Nevertheless, intersecting evolutions in the global political environment and shifts within the discipline of IR itself are pushing IR scholars to engage anew with questions about not only the type of actor that the state is, but also the normative-ethical stakes of how we name them, recognise them, and hold them accountable. Theoretical reflections on ethics, epistemology, and ontology in the papers on this panel complement exploration in a second panel on the uses and limits of state personhood discourse in critical security studies.

Track Classification: Contemporary Research on International Political Theory Working Group