

# **“Centres, Peripheries, Interstices: Towards an Eclectic Political Economy of Global Development”**

## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY OF WORKSHOP REPORT, 28-30 OCTOBER 2021**

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This Social Science and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) Connections Grant-funded workshop took stock of important changes in theory, methods, focuses, and practices of development in the context of a rapidly evolving global order.

Post-World War II thinking about the urgent challenges of poverty, inequality, and insecurity in the “Third World” provided broad-gauged structural explanations, applied across widely varied regions and countries. Understood in competing “modernization” and “dependency” terms, underdevelopment was perceived to be the result of either immature states or an exploitative world system. After several decades of analytical and policy disappointments, however, a more critical current of global development scholarship has embraced more complex and multi-dimensional accounts of the causes of underdevelopment as well as possible remedial solutions. Such scholarship has focused attention on an array of both formal and informal actors; local, regional, and transnational dynamics; and diverse forms of agency, including a central role for civil society. Recent accounts of global development feature a more complex, fluid, and varied landscape, with alternately vexing and hopeful prospects for historically marginalized communities in the Global South.

Theoretical approaches to global development issues are particularly urgent in the current climate of global development practice, marked by a paradoxical blend of unprecedented ambition (exemplified by the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals) and pervasive skepticism about the potential for effective development interventions in the face of overlapping crises. The workshop thus considered whether eclectic approaches to the political economy of development can help narrow the distance between these divergent dynamics.

The hybrid workshop brought together senior, mid-career, and emerging scholars from North America, Africa, Europe, and the Caribbean, all linked by shared critical and historically-grounded yet pragmatic commitments to understanding the array of forces that shape contemporary development practices and prospects. Workshop participants also were also linked by a shared connection – as students, collaborators, or colleagues – to the work of two of Canada’s most prominent and influential leaders in development studies, Timothy Shaw and Jane Parpart. The workshop celebrated their prolific scholarship, their contributions to eclectic theoretical and methodological innovations in global development studies, as well as the ongoing legacy of their academic mentorship and globe-spanning friendships.

The objectives of the workshop were three-fold:

- *to evaluate the gains in understanding that have emerged from more critical and ‘eclectic’ approaches to the political economy of the Global South;*

- *to assess the prescriptive implications and challenges associated with such approaches; and*
- *to reflect on implications for alternative development futures.*

The two-day workshop – with presentations of papers, plenary discussion, and video-recorded reflections by in-person workshop participants – was organized around four key themes: ***theories and methods; evolving forms of governance; agency; and alternative futures***. Participants engaged with the interconnected themes that have been advanced as part of novel approaches to the study of the political economy of global development, including a focus on historically neglected perspectives and actors as well as the various interstices and unexplored aspects of the theoretical terrain. In addition to highlighting advances in development-related thinking, participants reflected frankly on the challenges, limitations, and pitfalls associated with such a diverse and flexible array of ideas about international development in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

### ***Theories and methods***

The first thematic session considered how well the canon of international relations (IR) and international political economy (IPE) theory and its various “isms” account for today’s highly complex international (and domestic) political landscapes. Participants, all practitioners of eclectic or “magpie” theorizing, debated the extent to which such theoretical departures supplement or enrich traditional theories that generally have failed to evolve in the face of ever-changing developmental circumstances. Participants were challenged to look and think beyond a two-dimensional or cadastral view of the material world to consider whether current forms of global governance adequately meet the challenges of an ever-more complex and interconnected world. Attention also was given to the adequacy of theory in the face of climate emergency, environmental destruction, and unsustainable levels of resource extraction and waste marked by both its volume and its toxicity.

Participants considered how IR and IPE have for too long essentialized Africa, disregarding the continent’s vast diversity and relegating it to ill-defined “aberrant other” status. A key point of discussion was how critical approaches better address the importance of informal relationships in Africa, certainly at the communal level, but also across borders and regionally. Participants also were challenged to interrogate the often ill-defined relationship between theory and developmental practice, with a focus less on theorizing than striving for the possibility of positive change. They concurred on the importance of challenging or problematizing mainstream IR through the use of eclectic approaches, and to decolonize theory that remains overwhelmingly Western-centric.

The workshop also considered interdisciplinarity, feminism, and ‘outside-in’ approaches. Speakers explored the relationship between voice and agency and considered how both are sometimes manifest through silence. Whereas as silence, and particularly women’s silence, may be interpreted as disempowerment, silence also can be a powerful tool that speaks louder than words, actually amplifying voice. Silence also can be used to demonstrate agency. Workshop participants were challenged to think of silence as a way of addressing matters that cannot readily be spoken of, or that are purposefully withheld due to pain or trauma. They also noted that use of silence often is gendered. It was agreed that it is necessary to try to understand silence through active listening as a way of developing trusting relationships. Sharing in silence and intuiting what lies beyond words is an important part of ethical practice. More attention should be given to the “in-between space” between voice and silence, in that this interstice can tell us much about the social norms and behaviours that govern particular contexts,

including community dynamics and relationships of power. Participants agreed that silence, as a liminal space, can be generative.

Workshop participants also considered the extent to which Canada's 2017 feminist international assistance policy has become embedded in practice.

### ***Evolving forms of governance***

What the world understands as 'development' is diverse and contested. While the power and influence of the Westphalian state remains the primary lens for the study of IR, new forms of regional and municipal governance and the increasing importance of non-state actors present normative challenges. This is particularly true of the "resource-environment nexus" that now extends beyond mineral-based extractive industries to include other resources, such as fishing and forestry. New interconnections between transnational and local processes have emerged to 'govern' the challenges associated with the extractive sector, an important development given the importance of resource extraction to many Global South communities and countries.

In addition, regional organizations in Africa have become more directly involved in resource governance issues, taking on the role of quasi-developmental states and potentially leading to new 'developmental regionalisms' through the pursuit of greater regional integration by way of economic corridors. Such developments could significantly alter our conception of African IPE. Workshop participants also reflected on how in many countries, significant economic and social improvements have not been accompanied by increased political openness as marked by less than free and fair elections, constrained space for political dissent, and restrictions on civil society actors.

In considering 'new regionalisms,' workshop participants concurred on the need for pluralist approaches that challenge the primacy of the state and that address a changing world order, including the growing importance of informal regional networks that include both state and non-state actors. In the spirit of eclectic theorizing, participants were encouraged to pluralize key concepts, ontologies, and epistemologies to better reflect diversity of experience, including regionalisms, masculine and feminine perspectives, several Global Souths, and the varied and sometimes specific challenges posed by climate change, the Covid-19 pandemic, migration, etc. To this end, even something like praxes must be pluralized to better account for the agency of actors who construct regions and regionalisms.

The workshop also considered how gender is manifested in both old and new regionalisms, with a trend towards more specific recognition of gender in trade and other agreements, albeit not universally. With migration becoming an increasingly important issue, the workshop considered how technological innovation can be used to combat human trafficking.

It was noted that collaboration among small states can help them to "punch above their weight" in international fora.

### ***Agency***

A clear theme of the conference overall, agency (and who can act as agents) was given particular emphasis in a panel discussion 'African Solutions to African Problems.' Participants discussed the loci of power in IR as a field, in transnational and regional organizations, and even in national governments. As

part of eclectic theoretical approaches, it was agreed that it is important to move beyond conventional approaches to analysis and subject matter. It also was agreed that scholars should amplify marginalized voices wherever possible, including with respect to Africa and African scholars. Participants considered the purposeful pursuit of development by African states and the potential for an African variant of the “developmental state.” Consideration also was given to the role of other actors and institutional structures that have contributed, and may contribute in the future, to improved development outcomes across the continent. An overarching question that emerged from the discussions was how best to address “Africa” or, indeed “Africas.”

The workshop included a roundtable on the role of universities and think tanks in global development practice, and particularly with respect to poverty and inequality. It was noted that universities around the world are underfunded, despite expanded mandates. Resource-strapped think tanks similarly are under increased pressure to address an ever-expanding range of critical, and often overlapping issues. While there is need for universities and think tanks to engage with progressive issues abroad, there has been a dangerous trend where spaces of knowledge production have become increasingly politicized and partisan. This requires academics and researchers to consider their individual responsibilities as well as that of their institutions. It was agreed, however, that universities and think tanks remain key sites of development agency and innovation in the Global South, particularly with respect to cultivating domestically and regionally grounded visions of development.

### ***Alternative Futures***

The final workshop session considered how or the degree to which eclectic development studies inform both governmental and non-governmental practices. What do such approaches tell us about the kind of futures that these practices might bring about? It was noted that critical and eclectic approaches have always prioritized change and innovation in international theory and practice, including ideas of human development, human security, global governance, gender equity and empowerment, as well as formal and informal South-South collaboration.

Reflections on alternative futures – both progressive and regressive – infused the workshop’s discussions, including:

- the growing importance of municipal (especially mega-city) governance;
- the continued relevance of centre-periphery or dependency models;
- the commercial and political influence of sports and entertainment mega-events;
- the resource, energy, and waste implications of an increasingly digitized but also severely climate challenged world; and
- whether IR and IPE can confidently construct alternative futures given so many possible inflection points?

Overall, the workshop touched on many foundational IR and IPE theories and principles, revealing several commonalities that might serve as touchstones for further research as well as for new theoretical approaches. These new approaches could include an interrogation as to whether earlier and long-accepted theories of IR, IPE, and development are still relevant in today’s world, or whether the complexity of an increasingly connected world demands, if not new paradigms, at least new and imaginative ways of thinking about or constructing theory – including ‘magpie theory’ tailored to explain, and perhaps alter, our 21<sup>st</sup> century world.

Honouring the wide-ranging nature of Tim Shaw's and Jane Parpart's scholarship and contribution to the discipline, the workshop gave prominence to three themes:

- first, the importance of looking beyond static theory to develop and embrace a more eclectic type of theorizing to encourage new ways of thinking or to explore new, different, and sometimes hidden elements and interstices of theory;
- second, the importance of looking beyond theory as an academic practice to focus on how theory can be used to provoke or support positive change “everywhere and always,” and
- finally, the importance of academic mentorship and the development of a community of like-minded, but always inquiring and probing scholars.