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Reorienting Critical Geographies of Global Development: A Conversation with Han Cheng, Patricia Daley, Ruben Gonzalez-Vicente, Diana Vela-Almeida, and Joseph Awetori Yaro

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Abstract

This roundtable on reorienting critical geographies of global development was organized in response to "The Critical Geography Conversations: ACME's 20+ Year Anniversary". It brought together scholars from diverse backgrounds—including Han Cheng, Patricia Daley, Jospeh Yaro, Ruben Gonzalez-Vicente, and Diana Vela-Almeida—to reflect on significant shifts in global development geographies, such as the rise of the Global South, the consolidation of Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa (BRICS), especially China's role, and the urgency to question established spatial categories. The conversation created a space for collective reflection on the possibilities and challenges of reshaping how we teach, research, and engage with the world. In an era where unlearning and rethinking are vital to envisioning alternative futures, this dialogue emphasized the importance of forging new ways of being, feeling, and thinking about development and geography.

Keywords

development, geography, scale, class, anti-racism, militarism, activism

Introduction

The stimuli for this roundtable discussion emerged from intertwined intellectual and geopolitical processes including authoritarianism, capitalism, neoliberalism, militarization, racism, and patriarchy, as well as the myriad injustices they perpetuate: environmental degradation, the ongoing genocide in Gaza, the war in Sudan, and the pervasive violence across the Sahel, to name but a few.

Academic-based development scholars find themselves in intellectually and ethically fraught positions in the contemporary world. Intellectually, mainstream approaches to development studies—often reinforcing a vision of development grounded in Western modernization as a one-size-fits-all model—have remained dominant in both research and higher education, perpetuating a depoliticized vision of development (Ferguson 1994).

However, both within and in opposition to these technocratic frameworks, several scholars have advocated for alternative approaches to development (Kothari 2019; Ziai 2017), contesting dominant narratives and creating space for more critical and transformative perspectives. Meanwhile, the world has seen long-term structural shifts, e.g., the rise of the 'South' and South-South Cooperation (Gray and Gills 2016), the *southernization* of development (Mawdsley 2018), and the consolidation of Africa-China relations (Alden and Large 2019). Moreover, the Covid-19 pandemic both revealed and exacerbated global inequalities that some advocates of 'global development' (Horner and Hulme 2019) claimed were declining, as countries supposedly 'converged' in terms of economic growth.

Taken together, we wanted colleagues to discuss whether these and other ongoing dynamics required the reimagining of taken-for-granted geographical dichotomies (e.g., North-South, developed/underdeveloped) which reflect sedimented assumptions about where power lies and who creates knowledge about it. For instance, for decades 'development' was largely seen as an intentional process of intervention by western powers in the global South—a conceptualization that was rooted in geographical dichotomies that placed developing countries as the *other* of western modernity (Behuria 2024). Yet, China's role as the world's second-largest economy and a major development partner—one that is likely to become even more prominent following the dismantling of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID)—as well as its presence in Africa, requires us to reflect on the *who, where, how, and why* of global development maps. Such issues involve critically interrogating long-standing geographical imaginaries (Mohan 2021; Raghuram et al. 2014; Sidaway 2011; Ulloa 2024; Zaragocin 2024) and, with them, the very ways in which geography as a discipline is made. We may be at an inflection point in which the insights of critical geography can contribute to forging alternative ways of seeing, being, and feeling the world.

These are the concerns that animated our roundtable.

The five scholars featured in conversation here work from/on different regions of the world and cover a range of subjects—including, but not limited to, gender, political ecology, rural development, and the rise of China. Their scholarship not only disrupts conventional paradigms but also compels us to rethink development and geography. Furthermore, the positioning of 'where' people work and their authority to do so are deeply political and institutional issues.

We structured the discussion around three questions, which served as a roadmap into the roundtable discussion. First, we consider these scholars' different intellectual journeys and inheritances. Clearly, one thing that characterises development scholarship is its interdisciplinarity and commitment to some form of social transformation, so we wanted to hear how each person's work had evolved and why. By starting with their positionalities and acknowledging the risks this entails (Gani and Khan 2024), we sought to move from the personal to the political and collective actions. Second, we discuss what each scholar thinks needs to be done in terms of rethinking assumptions about both 'development' and 'geography'. Critical geographers have long argued that space is not a passive backdrop for social interactions. Given this, we ask: How are development and geography co-constituted and changing in the current conjuncture and how does this inform participants' work? This picks up from the first question, now inviting participants to reflect in more depth on particular aspects that animate them in their research process. The discussion here is wide-ranging. It jumps off from a critique of methodological nationalism, which not only conceals inequalities

within countries but also reifies certain actors and ways of seeing the world. The participants discuss different and intersecting forms of peripherality that confound simplistic analyses based on meta-geographical categories. Participants also reflected on the epistemic and racial violence of knowledges and practices that are rooted in western modernity and development, as well as on the possibilities of valorising other epistemologies. In different ways, participants engage as politically committed scholars, with this taking multiple forms, from activism with indigenous people to shaking up the assumptions of privileged students who are likely to go and work 'in' development. A recurring theme throughout these discussions of inequality and violence is the increasing pervasiveness of various forms of militarism in everyday life across the globe, whether that is domestic subjugation, violent dispossession, or geopolitical adventurism. As participants are sharp to note, it is not just states that have the monopoly of violence but also private actors, such as private security firms or mining companies, that appear increasingly empowered to use force.

The final question is, how can we make change happen in relation to, and given, the contexts described above? As engaged scholars, what are the possibilities and practicalities? Here we are careful to frame our intellectual reflections in dialogue with grounded realities, considering how we translate insights into practices that engage and resonate with ongoing changes and struggles. We are not interested in 'best practices' or 'fixed' blueprints but instead offer a more candid reflection on the creative ways our colleagues have tried to make change happen, the challenges this poses, and the plurality of possibilities this could open.

The Conversation

Personal Journeys

Mariasole Pepa: My name is Mariasole Pepa, and I am a geographer at the University of Padua. My desire in organizing this roundtable emerged from personal challenges I face as an early-career researcher attempting to deal with the complexities of conducting research around 'development' nowadays. In my research on Africa-China cooperation, I frequently asked myself: What is the 'South'? To what extent are the spatial categories I have been taught in university effective in capturing the profound transformations occurring in development geographies? What does decoloniality mean in practice?

These questions prompted me to expand the conversation with Giles Mohan, who has deeply contributed to this discussion [and with whom I envisioned this roundtable]. We then extended the invitation to you all—colleagues with whom we either have existing connections or whose intellectual work has shaped our understanding of these pressing issues. Thanks for participating!

Han Cheng: Thanks so much for the invitation. My name is Han Cheng. I am currently a Max Weber Foundation Research Fellow based at the Asia Research Institute of the National University of Singapore. My work looks at the politics and production of development knowledge. Broadly speaking, my research is situated at the intersection of political geography, critical development studies, and Global China Studies. This includes the changing dynamics of development finance, ideologies, norms, and partnerships. My other interest in this conversation is the status of development geography as a subfield, which has always fascinated me, given its somewhat peculiar position within the geography discipline.

Giles Mohan: Thanks, Han. I am next going to turn to Diana.

Diana Vela-Almeida: My name is Diana Vela-Almeida. I am an assistant professor in the Department of Sustainable Development at Utrecht University, and I am originally from Ecuador. While I live and work in the Netherlands, I am also part of the Critical Geography Collective of Ecuador[1]. I play this weird interface between being an academic in the Anglophone setting but an academic/activist in the Latin American context, working to support social movements for territorial resistance. My work mainly combines political ecology with feminist geography, studies on extractivism and environmental neoliberalism, and resistance in Latin America. Recently, I am interested in studying green capitalism within the EU agenda, specifically understanding the energy transition and the colonial legacy for extractive resources in the Global South, as well as the social reproduction and unrecognised labour in this transition.

Giles Mohan: Thanks, Diana. Patricia, next.

Patricia Daley: My name is Patricia Daley. I am a professor of the human geography of Africa in the School of Geography and the Environment, University of Oxford. I should point out why I chose the title the Human Geography of Africa. People always say, 'Where in Africa do you work?', what I intended to do was to assert the right to write and work across the continent of Africa, because in much colonial scholarship you tend to be bound in a sort of ethnic anthropological way to particular spaces, and I wanted to just abandon this logic. I do research on forced migration, militarism, and political violence. Recently, I published a book with my colleague Amber Murrey titled *Learning, Disobedience, Decolonizing Development Studies* (Murrey and Daley, 2023). The premise of the book is that international development needs to be abolished. We argue that the apparatus of international development is thoroughly implicated within ongoing colonial and capitalist formulations of extraction, marginalization and exploitation. My interests are also in knowledge making in the Global South, in racialization and its persistence in the contemporary world, and in the rise of militarism. I am extremely concerned about the extension of militarism throughout the Global South and especially in the African countries where I work.

Giles Mohan: Thanks, Patricia. Next, Ruben.

Ruben Gonzalez-Vicente: I am Ruben Gonzalez-Vicente, and I work at the University of Birmingham in the UK. I am an associate professor in political economy with a background in critical geography. Since 2007, I have been studying China's relations with Latin America and the Caribbean. More broadly, I am interested in how China's economic rise is transforming people's lives worldwide. I have always researched these questions within the framework of South-South relations. However, as a critical geographer, I am somewhat uneasy with these spatial categories, and as a political economist, I am particularly concerned that questions of class are often overlooked in South-South discussions.

Giles Mohan: Great. Thanks. Joseph finally.

Joseph Yaro: My name is Joseph Yaro. I am a human geographer from the University of Ghana in Accra. Since 2001, my research has focused on rural development, basically looking at sustainable development options for rural people in terms of livelihoods, food security, and

[1] https://geografiacriticaecuador.org/

climate change. It is difficult to do development geography in developing countries without looking at land because the land question is the biggest issue when it comes to rural development. My research and policy influence has been around issues of social justice and land justice, such as access to inputs and markets for communities. I think we need to digest and reflect on the new perspectives on development geography, which I think should go through a new lens of post-coloniality.

From personal journeys to collective reflections

Mariasole Pepa: Thank you very much for your introductions. To move on from here, it would be interesting if you could share what have been crucial turning points in your personal, academic, and political journeys. So, to move from your personal experience to a collective reflection on what needs to be done next, what perspectives do you reckon continue to be overlooked in critical development geographies. Moreover, it would be interesting to learn what makes you angry about working in a neoliberal academic setting and how this has shaped your practice and teaching.

Giles Mohan: I think several touched on the question of scale. Patricia mentioned the bounded scale of research, Ruben raised questions about what South-South means, Joseph also talked about how people think through scale frames. I wonder if you could also reflect a bit on scale in your work?

Patricia Daley: One of the things I wanted to shift from was what sociologists call methodological nationalism. I do think that a lot of the issues relating to so-called development transcend national boundaries and, also, Global North/South boundaries. Amber Murrey and I argue for the abolition of development. It is not that we want to abolish people's aspirations for a better quality of life. That is very important. But what we are aware of are the inequalities in access to improved living conditions and how those inequalities have increased over time. Working in Oxford, I realised the hegemony of Oxford 'development' experts on development policy and practice. I know some of them will go to Africa, and they will stay in a five-star hotel and never actually leave the hotel. Ministers will go to them, and, when they finish, they will fly out and formulate policy for the continent based on their theoretical economic models. So that's one of the reasons why I want to abolish development, because I think the idea of development promotes white supremacy and Eurocentric modernity and now an Eastern version of that modernity. The other reason why I am interested in abolishing development is the violence of development. Neoliberalism is violent for the majority of people, and development, as we understand it, promotes racism. Some of the conditions that people are expected to tolerate are dehumanising. We need to move away from dehumanizing practices at the same time as recognizing the seductiveness of development.

Diana Vela-Almeida: Can I please jump in? I want to connect to one point that Patricia was mentioning in terms of knowledge production. I was raised in Ecuador, but I was trained in Anglophone Academia. A really important turning point for me was when I went back to work in Ecuador when I finished my PhD. All the literature that I knew was in English. I think it was then that I realised the hegemonic power of Anglophone Academia to always comprise, in a way, all the know-how, in terms of thinking about development, as Patricia was mentioning, but also how it appropriates a lot of knowledge production that comes from the South. I am speaking particularly in South America. I think my personal struggles are emphasizing the

knowledge production that is happening in Latin America while recognizing civil society, especially social movements, and Indigenous movements as subjects of knowledge production. This production of knowledge when migrating to other places is often unrecognised or co-opted. For example, feminist methods such as *cuerpo-territorio* are at risk in a way of co-option by the Anglophone literature when we take ideas and decontextualize them from their historical and political origins and the purposes for which they were developed. It also happens when we do not acknowledge the indigenous women as the producers of this knowledge.

I also want to add a reflection on the role of the state. During my PhD, I was mainly working with communities, assisting in mapping their own territories for the defense of their lands. In many ways the research was emphasizing social environmental conflicts of social movements and indigenous movements in direct confrontation with the State without much attention to the transnational coercive power that takes place. Over the years, I started to feel a little bit more uncomfortable about the scale and level of analysis because my research journey started when a progressive government was in power in Ecuador, and then a new neoliberal right-wing government entered into power and there was a big difference in the forms and mechanisms by which extractivism took place. I think that a lot of the critical literature on extractivism, for example, is not nuanced enough on differentiating the lasting consequences of the ideological agenda that different governments can hold. On scale, it is important to also look at broader geopolitical relations, for example, for understanding extractivism beyond the state, how it reinforces dependency, and historical patterns of colonialism. That is important, and I think it tackles the point of what Patricia was saying on going beyond methodological nationalism.

Ruben Gonzalez-Vicente: Can I go next? I would like to touch on Giles' point about scale and the issue of methodological nationalism and intertwine them with my own personal journey. I think my perspective is a bit unusual because I study China, a case that does not really fit within a rigid North-South binary. Also, Galicia, the region where I grew up in Spain, was historically quite deprived despite being in Europe. For example, my grandmother was a brave, illiterate woman who had to migrate to Venezuela in the 1960s to work as a domestic worker in order to pay for my mother's secondary education. Hearing my parents' stories about their upbringing, it certainly felt more like a periphery rather than the centre of empire. It was actually my experiences as a South-South researcher that brought me into contact with levels of wealth and power I had never experienced growing up—for example, living in China and seeing the sons of party officials driving fancy cars in Beijing or interviewing mining bosses in Peru. This made me reflect on scale, like you mentioned, and go beyond methodological nationalist frameworks. I realised I was studying in elite spaces, even though my concerns lay with what was happening on the ground and how people were being impacted by these new economic relations. My research opened doors to spaces I would never have visited if I were not a researcher. That is why I think class is such an important dimension of South-South relations. When I talk about class, I mean the relation between capital and labour, elite and non-elite populations and spaces. I think we need to use these concepts and frameworks to understand power, oppression, and injustice when studying new geopolitical and geoeconomic linkages. We also need to question what development means in different contexts and understand the power relations that underpin it. These are essential tools to avoid an oversimplified account of North and South.

Han Cheng: I also want to touch on the methodological nationalism issue in connection to scale, and especially the politics of academic scale.

I think the issue of methodological nationalism is important when thinking about global China studies and how it sits awkwardly with the conventional paradigm of area studies, given my current institutional base. This is bigger than global China and has more epistemological and methodological implications. Also speaking as someone who recently was on the job market, the politics of academic scale are very much present in the way that hires are structured. If you study China-Africa relations, in the Anglophone job market at least, geography or otherwise, you're not considered an Africanist, and you did not do an 11-month ethnography in a village in China, so you're not a Sinologist either. So even though I think in the academic debates, we talk a lot about scale and scale crossing, in everyday reality, we're still put into some boxes. We could think of issues in relation to racism, epistemic violence, and so on, all the issues that Patricia touched on from different angles earlier. In terms of my own personal journey, I did not realise until this recent job searching experience that I have always been in this in-between. Before the PhD, I was working as a fixer for the New York Times and The Guardian in China, reporting on domestic issues. Then I joined international think tanks. This was in the early 2010s, and it was all about China. Inc. All the donor money went in, but at the time I did not know about this field called 'Development'. I was in the 'aidland' without knowing it, and I was becoming interested in China-Africa relations and South-South cooperation. Development only happened to me, or, I only encountered development when I came to the UK for my PhD.

Giles Mohan: I think it is interesting that kind of limbo because I feel similar. I claim I am not a Sinologist. I guess I get kind of trolled literally by people saying, you do not know anything about China. I never pretended to be a China expert. I mean, God knows what a China expert looks like. How can you be an expert on anything? I do not call myself an African expert, either. I am interested in what the developmental implications of these relationships are for both the Chinese actors and those spaces and places where these investments are occurring and what it means for a sense of Europeanness and a sense of modernity. I am just wondering: is there something about this space in between, this limbo, that actually gives one insights they otherwise wouldn't? I do not know if it applies to other people. Is there a virtue in that, in a sense of understanding these kinds of critical processes in a way that you do not if you lock yourself into sort of a methodological nationalism or even a local nationalism?

Joseph Yaro: Related to this question, I've gotten a lot from Frans J. Schuurman's book (1983) *Beyond the impasse: new directions in development theory*, and from there I have also benefited a lot in my journey from feminist geography, like Doreen Massey (1994). It is only over the past 5 years that I have familiarized myself with post-colonial studies. Geography from the beginning was mainly influenced by the modernist perspective and propelled by the World Bank and so-called development partners. Given the emerging relations of capital that we have and given the fact that the historical experiences of Brazil, Russia, India, China, South-Africa (BRICS countries) are very different from that of the West, from that of America and Europe, it feels that we really do not really have hypotheses as to the direction in which this new relationship is going to emerge and what that means for what we call development. I think that is basically where we are now.

So how do we reposition the constellations of peripheries that we've always learned from Wallerstein's time? I mean, certainly this cannot be the case anymore and we need to

move on. And there's a lot of call for more grounded research and studying of what we call real processes and structures. I've told my students, my PhD students, many times that if we continue to deal with these old concepts, it means that we are going to have lots of trouble.

How do we move from these concepts straight to iterations of those concepts that should really be the main core of radical geography—exploitation, destruction, punishment, exclusion, collusion, corruption, and democracy? Racism, dehumanising, and hypocrisy? These are very important concepts that we do not engage in. I think that probably these should become the new century concerns that replace our core concepts of peripheries, West, and East. The capitalism we are looking at today is not that of the eighties and nineties; it is a recalibrated one whereby you do have what I've called a messed-up world. Now, how do we deal with this messed-up world? And I have always argued that we *need* a more messed-up world; a more messed-up world simply means that we need to break down all these boundaries and concepts that we have had in the past.

Rethinking spatial categories

Diana Vela-Almeida: Can I add one small point? I was just thinking the purpose of this conversation is about reshuffling. So, let's reflect if these categories that we have created are working or if they make sense at some point. I think we are all able to create nuances, and challenge these ideas in many ways because they do not work as they used to work. However, my point is that this will come not only from applying an analytical perspective but also from thinking about the political agenda we have as researchers, then I think these categories make sense.

I can reflect on my own journey, coming from a family with a very anti-imperialist and anti-capitalist perspective. Now I've moved to the Netherlands and I would always place myself in these two categories. I am from the Global South, and I have a specific history to acknowledge. Basically, I am labour force right here in Europe. I do not have the right by birth to be here. I strongly emphasise these dichotomies because they work for my embodied narratives. I think my point is not to argue against the reconfiguration or reshaping of old concepts, because I agree with that. However, I think now, I have a clearer understanding of how class politics and race politics also play a major role within Europe. Indeed, not all Europeans are the same, and not all migrants are the same, you have to play with a lot of historical dynamics here. Nevertheless, I still like to look from my embodied political agenda, which is focusing on these anti-imperial Global South relations. My categories of Global South and Global North still work for me because you also choose the agendas that you want to pursue. Right?

Patricia Daley: Thanks, Diana and Joseph. Joseph, I think the concepts that you've outlined are really important, especially the need to think about everyday lives and how people live their lives. I always see myself as a geographer, somebody who operates at different spatial scales. For me, that's the real benefit of being a geographer. We are not confined to one particular scale in terms of our research. I spent my early years in rural Jamaica, and even though I am at Oxford, where I transcend different racialized communities in terms of my friendship group, I am aware that my family's own trajectory as Black people is very different from the other communities around me. I also spent some of my formative years in East London in a predominantly white working-class community with small groups of migrants from all over the world. My extended family has a history of migration, of existing at multiple

scales. Some stayed in rural Jamaica. Some went to the city to try and make a living,in Kingston mainly, and others went to Central America, North America, and the UK. My grandmother's brothers went to Honduras to work on banana plantations. They went to Panama to build the canal. Others went to the U.S.A., Canada, and Britain, and some of my relatives are still migrating out of Jamaica. Those everyday experiences matter, how people survive and negotiate their existence. Joseph, you're right; we study migrants as labour, but they are about making a living, right? I look at the women in my family who've done all sorts of work in order to make a living, and somehow they find joy in their marginalized existence, they find ways of creating life. A life world that is nurturing, that's supportive, right, outside of the capitalist framework. They are in Britain. But, they're not in Britain. I am interested in those everyday experiences, as well as how global approaches to migration and political economy are changing at the national, regional and international levels. Joseph mentioned Doreen Massey, and Doreen talks about space always being in the process of making, and I really think that we should think about that.

Going back to the concepts that you mentioned, Joseph, one of the things that's really important is conviviality. I really like that concept. We have to live. And I mean Francis Nyamnjoh, the Cameroonian scholar, talks about incompleteness (Nyamnjoh, 2015). If we're going to transcend racism and ethnicity, we have to think about how we live with differences—about how we live at different scales—in our neighborhoods, city, the region, the state, and globally. People live with differences in the everyday. Well, often we do not want to understand that we sometimes produce ideas that actually complicate and disrupt how people live. We do not interpret and really understand how people get along on an everyday basis. I think this is what critical geography and critical development should be doing.

Ruben Gonzalez-Vicente: This is very interesting. I was thinking about how in our interventions so far, we've been advocating for different ways to use lenses of class relations and racial hierarchies. It would seem that we have been stepping away from spatial categories, and we've been certainly trying to move away from a simplistic North/South or centre/periphery dichotomy. But I think we all agree that space does matter; we are geographers after all. What we seem to be aiming for, I believe, is an understanding of space that considers how space is formed through class relations, racial hierarchies, and various relations of inequality. Space is not the methodologically nationalist given that Patricia critiques but a social formation infused with different forms of inequality.

In my own research, discussions of South-South relations and solidarity come into the spotlight with all the new infrastructure built by Chinese companies. At the same time, I see Chinese migrants living in cramped construction site dormitories, working 12-hour days in the sun for below minimum wage. Their stories often get lost in the larger narrative of new South-South relations between China and Jamaica, for example. I think again that's what geography can do: highlight these spaces and explain how new infrastructures and new forms of connectivity are all underpinned by different relations of oppression, inequality, and exploitation. This is why geographical understandings of space and scale are crucial.

Militarism in the everyday

Giles Mohan: Could I ask a question? I think Patricia raised it in her initial discussion about militarism. Then I think Joseph picked up on it. There are lots of ways in which the military is increasingly involved in the everyday. We have these authoritarian leaders across the world

who are increasingly deploying violent means. Modi is the same, Trump is the same, and Boris Johnson is the same. So there's this danger, I think, of lumping them all together as kind of illiberal or authoritarian, but there's interesting and worrying ways in which that violence is now infiltrating in so many visible ways. I wonder if people had thoughts about what the implications for us geographers, or generally, are.

Patricia Daley: In my teaching, I do talk about the relationship between militarism and development. I drew on an interdisciplinary body of scholarship, particularly African feminist scholarship. Scholars like Amina Mama have informed my discussion about the way in which militarism—historically rooted in colonial military practices and persisting into the contemporary period—has impacted African communities and has frustrated attempts to development. I have also looked at the way in which militarism has penetrated societies. I am interested in how to move beyond militarism. The other thing is when you said we need to look at it in a more nuanced way. I think in some of my work I have looked at private security companies, and how they are so tied into the extraction and securitization of particular development projects. It would be really interesting to think about militarism in relation to the military coming back as a solution to problems, to the problems of neoliberalism, and to the problems of neo-colonialism, particularly in West Africa. People are seeing what is happening in Mali or Burkina Faso. Is that good? I was in a conference about militarism in the Sahel region and one of the panelists basically said, the problem is, the military are listening. So, civil society could be tamed when they are controlled as development actors, but if civil society asserts their independence, and in this case, attempts to influence military regimes, then they are problematic. Nevertheless, I do not see how a military regime in the long term can bring about security or the sorts of economic transformation that people want. Perhaps a more nuanced discussion is needed about what role these regimes might play, if any, in social transformations.

Joseph Yaro: Two days ago, I was at a conference, and basically the whole idea was about the definition of the concept of *coup d'etat* and the concept of democracy. The two concepts can mean the same thing. How did that come about? Just using what has happened in the Sahel now, the speaker said if the military is listening to society and basically acting on behalf of society then a *coup d'etat* becomes a democracy, because it reflects the will of the people. At the same time, democracies in Africa actually could hit us because they are basically the hijacking of the will of the people through corruption through vote buying, intimidation, and alliances with the West right? Especially France has military bases in these countries—take the case of Ouattara[2] who came to power basically through the same militarism, I mean using the French army, who claim they were impartial, but who actually paved the way for him, and who have been behind him. So, I think it is high time we reflect on demonising what we call *coup d'etat*, and at the same time, living out what we call a democracy when we know it is not actually a democracy. If we stick to the principle, then I am sure we will return back to the right meaning of *coup d'etat* and democracy.

[2] This discussion references the wave of coups that took place in West Africa during the early 2020s—a phenomenon so prevalent that some observers have labeled the region the "coup belt." Alassane Ouattara has served as President of Côte d'Ivoire for the past fifteen years, with consistent backing from France throughout his various electoral campaigns.

Mariasole Pepa: I just wanted to jump in on the discussion about the Sahel because the project I am involved in is about water and land in the Sahel[3].Obviously, we deal a lot with questions related to militarism, *coup d'etat*, the role of Jihadist groups, and since April 2023 with the war in Sudan. This is a context of polycrises. Going back to what we discussed about transcending scales, this has been much the case in our project. The project is about the impact of irrigation mega-development projects in the Sahel but this cannot be disentangled from the increased militarization of water and militarism in the everyday. For example, just before the start of the war, we were doing fieldwork close to Atbara and we passed across a huge new investment in irrigation with 19 pumping stations from the Nile. We later found out the project was held by Zadna International Company for Investment Limited, a company owned by the Sudanese military. This is to say that it is important to consider what water and land as geographical lenses can tell us about spatial reconfigurations and conflicts.

Moreover, speaking from Cairo, where I am currently based, and going back to what Ruben was saying before about entering elite space with our research, most of the people I interviewed here are previous members of the Ministry of Agriculture, leading actors within big companies, and this made me reflect on how the development discourse that I hear about agriculture in Sudan during the war is from an elite perspective. What is happening in the everyday lives of farmers and communities is missing from the picture. For me, this also brings us to other sets of reflections around the ethics of doing research during a war and rethinking what our role as geographers could or should be.

Ruben Gonzalez-Vicente: I think development has always been violent and authoritarian. Sometimes when political scientists and others analyse the rise of new populist and authoritarian leaders, they overlook the connection between the insecurities that development has promoted across the world, and the desire people feel to be protected by these new populist figures that promise the security that they have been lacking. I think the advantage of doing multi-scalar research on development is that you can trace national-level political change to the ground-level violence of development and the reactions to it.

Diana Vela-Almeida: Right on point, Ruben. I think it is important to make all these differences because violence as a product of militarization is not the same as violence as a consequence of people racing to power on the back of a massive mobilisation. I think it is important to make a difference between what we mean by militarization and violence.

I kind of feel like the way that we currently manage conflict and war is through the means of violence rather than other means of politics. We have an example right now, happening in front of our eyes with Palestine. That is, genocide is happening there, and the only way that this has been managed is through violence, militarization, and ethnic cleansing. But again, because I study resource access and how militarization is connected to securitization, I think it is almost like the current agenda of legitimization and access to resources globally is through the means of militarization and police repression.

I guess we all are reading through the nuances in the places that we are most familiar with, and I think for me, what is happening in Ecuador really touches home. Here the power

[3] For further insights into the project, see: https://atlasahel.it/en/atlas/, as well as the volume *Water and Land in the Sahel: Mapping the Flow* (Pase et al., 2025).

given to the police and military has basically taken the place of the government in administering conflict. I think it is also connected to anti-democratic regimes and mechanisms. As citizens, we do not have the power to put together a democratic way of administering things because everything gets read through public force and the police or military taking over the control of a territory creates more violence. But we just legitimise the power of the police. Another problem in Ecuador is the naturalisation of the police taking control over the politics of a place. Another important thing that we must pay attention to is the criminalization of social protesters and the criminalization of certain leaders that can play a critical role in contesting power.

Han Cheng: I was just thinking of your point about militarism and I think when Derek Gregory (2004) wrote *The Colonial Present*, it was a vital moment for Anglophone geographers to rethink geography's relationship with the Global South. It was especially inspired by the sudden realisation about the extent to which GIS as a tool was deployed in the Gulf wars. When you raised militarism earlier, it reminded me that I was browsing this year's Association of American Geographers conference program and it struck me the frequency of GeoAI as a keyword. A couple of panels involved the US State Department's Office of the Geographer and Global Issues, which, of course, has its Cold War precedence. So, I actually wonder whether the present, two decades on from *The Colonial Present*, this time with Gaza and Ukraine should be, or could be, an important moment for the discipline again.

What can we do?

Thinking through practices, research, and pedagogies

Giles Mohan: I want to shift towards the question, "What can we do?" We have touched on this already, where Diana talked about the hegemony of Anglophone academia, and we know that there's a whole academic publishing world that is just so skewed against the vast majority of the world. Diana also talked about how knowledge then becomes decontextualized, and Pat Noxolo warns about the way in which radical ideas are co-opted, diminished, ignored, and so on. So, what role can critical knowledge play? And what's our role? What can we do practically?

Joseph Yaro: Teaching development and geography should not end at just introducing the older theories to students. We should be allowing students to define the next generation of viewpoints. There are a lot of things many of us think we know, but I bet we do not really understand what is going on now. These young people do understand a lot more than we do, and the interactive methodologies that many of you are using should allow newer viewpoints, which would amaze you.

I think when it comes to knowledge production, as we write, we should be co-producing this with the activist practitioners and even politicians. For a long time, I have demonised politicians. Then I started interacting with them, and I was amazed at the kind of troubles they face at their level, especially politicians from the South. The kind of troubles they go through at the hands of Western politicians, at the hands of Western capital, and also, of course, among their peers here in Africa. So, I think we should be co-producing knowledge with these guys rather than just bashing them. Many of us have worked with local communities for a long time, but I think we have often omitted the voices of activists and some practitioners. I did not believe that these guys had anything to offer, because they were part of the problem,

you know, but I think it is important that we engage them to really know their own lived experiences and what propels them to do what they do.

Diana Vela-Almeida: This interface between activism and academia is important for me, because it allows me to be in an uncomfortable place to see where and how I can contribute the most. I locate myself there as an academic, sometimes slightly more as an activist—it is tricky. So, my political sphere was always in Latin America and Ecuador. What does it mean now for me when I am in the Netherlands working in an academia that does consider activism as a legitimate academic role? So, I just want to say that I do not romanticise this relationship of academia-activism because it is not easy to be both at the same time. It is actually a really difficult relationship. There's one thing that is super important for me and that is to situate myself politically and allocate different forms of accountability that I have towards my colleagues, the people I research with, and my students. For example, in the politics of citation or representation. What is the political purpose of academia? What is the accountability that I have to the places where I do research?

Patricia Daley: The book that Amber and I wrote talked about the need for pedagogic disobedience, and Diana has mentioned some of it already. We think it really entails breaking from, or active or passive forms of denial of the colonial logics of knowledge that we have inherited and we've been schooled in. Now in my teaching I look for sources that might not be from geographers. In fact, most of the time they are not. This means to me working in a very interdisciplinary way. So, I start off with texts by people who are writing about similar concepts from other disciplinary positions and introduce my students to them. Recently, I was talking about migration and all my sources on transnationalism were East Asian scholars - Chinese or Korean. I think my students were really surprised, but I wanted them to recognize that there are other scholars who are racialized as Black, Brown, etc. who are actually producing important work on similar themes.

Of course, it is important to ensure cultivation of anti-racist practices, and I think highlighting other scholars from outside Anglophone or the non-European heritage is part of fostering anti-racist practices so that students learn about other places differently. I do not provide a blueprint or map for my students, but I get them to think about the world otherwise, to see the world from another perspective. As I said, people living or seeking to live differently under capitalism have done it in different ways across the world. So, that the idea of moving beyond capitalism isn't seen as something that is unattainable. Actually, I used to like the work of Gibson-Graham on diverse economies[4], but now I think there are other texts that I can bring into the discussion about alternatives to capitalism so that students can see that there are options.

Ruben Gonzalez-Vicente: This is the most difficult question to answer. I agree with everything that has been said so far about coproduction, engagement, and presenting different perspectives on world politics and development. But I want to emphasise the importance of presenting these perspectives critically. I am thinking here, perhaps less about geography and more about International Relations (IR). There's a recent trend to globalise IR and incorporate knowledge from different national schools of IR into mainstream curricula. But some of these emerging national schools of IR are anything but progressive, despite

[4] https://www.communityeconomies.org/

variations within them. For example, the national school of IR in China is not particularly concerned with ordinary people, focusing instead on strategies and justifications to project Chinese national power internationally. We should diversify the curriculum but do so critically, which doesn't contradict Patricia's earlier points. We can also use our platforms to challenge new knowledge frameworks created by powerful actors for their own benefit, which often produce new forms of injustice. This means bringing the ideas we're discussing today into our interactions with policymakers and other influential figures.

Han Cheng: I was just about to say that Ruben has a brilliant commentary in an article called *Confucian Geopolitics*, which I recommend for reading (see Gonzalez-Vicente 2021). I really like everything that has been said. I also agree with Ruben that this was probably the most difficult question of all. I actually came up with this crazy idea of leaving geography. I had this quite clear and strong idea when I entered the job market six months ago that I am not convinced by the disciplinary direction that geography has taken in the past few years, and if that's the way the discipline is heading, then I am not going to be with it. But by leaving geography, I do not mean discarding it; rather, I will take the geographical lens or perspectives into the wider world. From day one, I never agreed with the disciplinarization of geography.

Mariasole Pepa: I just wanted to connect with what Joseph was saying about teaching and about including students' perspectives in the knowledge production process. This year has been my second year of teaching. I am teaching a course on Geographical space: concepts, tools, and practice in the master's degree in Local Development. The same master's degree I attended as a student just a few years ago. So, in preparing the course, I have been thinking of how I felt as a student: on one hand, learning critical theories and, on the other hand, feeling without the power to act. I see this feeling reflected in the students and in their feedback on the course about how great it is to learn about alternatives, critiques of development, etc., but they come up with the same question: what can we actually do? (Caretta and Pepa 2023).

I have been reflecting on how to connect teaching with practice. This semester, we organised a laboratory on collective mapping with kollectiv orangotango[5] and we engaged local activists in class, reflecting on how the maps produced by students could talk to collectives (Pepa et al. 2024). So, imagining other ways of teaching and reconsidering the class as the most radical space of possibility, to echo bell hooks words. Another important point for me is to weave a space of care in class, weaving community agreements. I think it is important to reflect and share with other colleagues on how to do that. A space where students can feel safe to openly speak without being judged, an antiracist classroom.

Giles Mohan: I agree.

Patricia Daley: Just a quick point about students. My students also ask, what can we do? And first of all, I try to get them to dissent from development actors. They have been brought up to think we are better off in the West, and therefore we should do these things for these poor people in the Global South. And I am going to do voluntary work. I am going to do my gap year and build a school or whatever. First of all, I said, your responsibility is different. You do

[5] https://orangotango.info/

not have to go and show people. You do not have to become a development actor, right? What you need to do is to reorientate your responsibility, to think critically about how you can challenge the place, the state, and the powers in place where you are located in order to change their approaches to other places in the Global South. Think about working transnationally with activist groups elsewhere in the Global South. Some of my students go into the field, and they end up in government or other development agencies. These are Oxford students. One student recently came back and said to me, "Oh, Patricia, I just have to tell you, you are on my back" And I said, "Good! Good! At least, whenever you implement a policy, you think about some of the things I have said, and you will try to make a difference. Try to implement policy differently". So it is. Yeah. They go off and become politicians. I am not always successful but sometimes I am, and they go into the Tory party, and they promote a green agenda, for example, which for me is good. Reorientate where they think their responsibility is.

Paths Forward

Our roundtable did not seek to establish definitive conclusions or formulate blueprints for the future, nor did it aim to offer neat solutions to the question 'how we deal with this messy world,' to borrow Joseph Yaro's phrasing during the discussion.

Instead, the primary objective was to facilitate a virtual space for engaging with this disorder and providing an opportunity to collectively share concerns, ideas, and potential paths forward—an effort that is only possible collectively. The urgency lies in bringing together diverse perspectives on critical issues—such as spatial scales, militarism and development, anti-racist practices, and pedagogical disobedience—that we collectively recognize as pressing across the fields of research and pedagogy and in relation to structural challenges and multiple forms of injustices.

The discussion highlights the importance of transcending scales and the need to critically rethink spatial categories. All participants concurred on the value of adopting multi-scalar perspectives, whether considering shifting geopolitical relationships, geoeconomic tensions, or emerging solidarities. The conversation highlighted how militarism is intricately woven into the fabric of development. Participants emphasized the need to confront the inherent violence embedded in many development practices, recognizing that these practices often exacerbate existing inequalities rather than ameliorate them.

Equally important was the recognition of co-thinking through practical engagement, pedagogical approaches, and research trajectories. The roundtable participants reflected on their own pedagogical responsibilities, recognizing the profound influence they have on shaping students' understandings of the world and their roles within it. Participants emphasized that, while educators bear significant responsibilities in terms of teaching and guiding students, we must also listen to our students. They, too, bring valuable insights and perspectives that can challenge, reshape, and enhance development thinking.

There were also calls for genuine co-production of knowledge with groups, individuals, and collectives outside academia, alongside the need to engage with policymakers. While acknowledging that policymakers may have vested interests, it was recognized that they hold significant power, and thus, efforts must be made to influence and shape their perspectives.

The motivation behind this roundtable arises from a shared commitment to creating meaningful dialogues across multiple geographies. At a time when it is increasingly urgent to rethink and reimagine (Rose-Redwood et al. 2024) the futures of teaching, research, and practice within the framework of (decolonial) 'development' geographies, this roundtable sought to foster a deeper understanding of how these futures can be shaped collectively—an invitation to multiply spaces of cross-fertilizations in, within, and beyond academic boundaries.

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