

# Theory, change and the search for epistemological courage in shaping a new world order

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## Abstract

No matter how narrowly you focus your spatial or temporal lenses, you are bound to catch sight of multiple significant challenges to human community. Many of these challenges are shared, such as Covid-19, though their impacts on individuals and groups are felt unevenly. Some challenges are immediate and existential, such as the wars in Ukraine, Syria, and Yemen. Others, such as race, gender, caste, and class-based inequalities, are deeply embedded in social structures, providing privilege and persecution, and reward and oppression in unequal measures. And climate change, though slower moving, holds out the prospect of leading to total social collapse. How to make sense of these dramatic changes? This essay explores the adequacy of theories of IR and G/IPE in explaining the emergent world (dis)order. It argues that, whether orthodox or critical, theory must find a way to centre humanity within the biosphere if theory is to adequately inform practice.

## Keywords

Global political economy, international relations, IR theory, international political economy, theory, world order

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Blah, blah, blah.

- Greta Thunberg

One of the key requirements for clear theoretical thinking is that we become aware of the taken-for-granted common-sense assumptions that generally frame our vision of the world. The sense that we already know the essentials is one of the greatest obstacles to critical thinking.

- Sears and Cairns (2010: 14–15)

It is no longer clear that our theoretical frameworks, key concepts and empirical pre-occupations remain up to the task of making sense of, let alone fashioning solutions to, the global challenges of the times in which we live.

- Best et al. (2021: 218)

Transform or collapse is now the stark choice for the future of the global political economy.

- Paterson (2021: 395)

No matter how narrowly you focus your spatial or temporal lenses, you are bound to catch sight of multiple significant challenges to human community. Many of these challenges are shared, such as Covid-19 and the rising prices of energy, housing, and food, though their impacts on individuals and groups are felt unevenly. Some challenges are immediate and existential, such as the wars in Ukraine, Syria, and Yemen. Others, such as race, gender, caste, and class-based inequalities, are deeply embedded in social structures, providing privilege and persecution, and reward and oppression in many ways. Climate change, though slower moving, holds out the prospect of entirely reorganizing the biosphere, leading in some cases to ecosystem and civilizational collapse. In a globalized world, these challenges are interlinked through information systems, supply chains, flows of finance, people, and things. Responses to, and repercussions of, these myriad challenges result in desirable and undesirable, intended and unintended consequences at different physical and temporal scales, offering social/individual reward and punishment in unequal measure.

Innumerable think tanks, private companies, governments, inter-governmental and non-governmental entities, para-statal enterprises and university-based scholars (public and private) have weighed in on different aspects of these challenges, offering advice to citizens, shareholders, and themselves regarding what is to be done in the

corporate, public, community, or planetary interest. Beyond the “expert,” ordinary citizens weigh in daily through social media and/or take to the streets to make their voices heard. Often, sustained engagement gives rise to virtual or physical social movements—e.g., #Occupy, #IdleNoMore, #MeToo, #FridaysForFuture—whose demands reflect their shared lived realities.

Every one of us participates in social theory, explicitly or implicitly seeking to explain the world around us in order to successfully navigate our way through the day. Success, to paraphrase Amartya Sen,<sup>1</sup> is a day free from want and fear. Aside from a select few—e.g., Bezos, Musk, Putin—individual theoretical frameworks only have impact when held en masse. The epigrams above suggest that the socio-ecological consequences of our collective theorizing are significant. While Alan Sears and James Cairns<sup>2</sup> caution against uncritically holding onto our assumptions, and Jacqueline Best et al.<sup>3</sup> question the ability of current theoretical and conceptual frameworks to provide viable solutions to the myriad challenges we face today, Matthew Paterson’s<sup>4</sup> “stark choice” elucidates the conceptual corner into which we humans have painted ourselves: transform or collapse.

In this essay, I take Jacqueline Best’s and her colleagues’<sup>5</sup> observations regarding conceptual, empirical, and disciplinary “blind spots” in international/global political economy (I/GPE) and Mats Larsson’s<sup>6</sup> provocative book title *The Blind Guardians of Ignorance* as necessary points of departure to explore the foundations of theory in International Relations (IR) and I/GPE. In terms of the former, Best et al.<sup>7</sup> suggest that global political economic theorizing would do well to “adopt a more modest ontology that remains open to question and challenge—and, above all, that is aware of and sensitive to its own partiality.” Moreover, they argue that (critical) political economy has less to lose from this approach than do more mainstream approaches. I will return to this point later. Larsson goes further in his critique, stating—in alignment with Paterson—that what is needed is sustained interrogation of the actions necessary for transformation. Current approaches, no matter how critical, he argues, scarcely begin to probe the depth and scale of the change necessary to confront the current climate crisis. While all three imply that humans can reason their way out of the current crisis, this

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1. Amartya Sen, *Development as Freedom* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1999).

2. Alan Sears and James Cairns, *A Good Book, In Theory* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010).

3. Jacqueline Best, Colin Hay, Genevieve LeBaron, and Daniel Mügge, “Seeing and not-seeing like a political economist: The historicity of contemporary political economy and its blind spots,” *New Political Economy* 26, no. 2 (2021): 217–228.

4. Matthew Paterson, “Climate change and international political economy: Between collapse and transformation,” *Review of International Political Economy* 28, no. 2 (2021): 394–405.

5. Best et al., “Seeing and not-seeing like a political economist”; Genevieve LeBaron, Daniel Mügge, Jacqueline Best and Colin Hay, “Blind spots in IPE: Marginalized perspectives and neglected trends in contemporary capitalism,” *Review of International Political Economy* 28, no. 2 (2021): 283–294.

6. Mats Larsson, *The Blind Guardians of Ignorance: Covid-19, Sustainability, and Our Vulnerable Future – A Handbook for Change Leaders, Young and Old* (Exeter, UK: Imprint Academic, 2020).

7. Best et al., “Seeing and not-seeing like a political economist,” 227.

article puts forward a somewhat different critique of contemporary IR I/GPE theorizing, thus showing less faith in current models and methods.

This essay challenges theorists of global change to show some epistemological courage. The models, methods, and frameworks we have devised to explain, predict, and control global social change have failed us at the collective level. Theories of sustainability have little impact on stemming the loss of biodiversity. Theories of security and development do nothing to stem the rising tide of human misery. Theories of justice and inequality cannot put an end to any form of discrimination. Theories of biospheric “tipping points” provide a never-ending set of “deadlines” the human community regularly fails to meet, while theories of global governance struggle in the face of growing populism. At the same time, aphorisms abound to justify limited, individual/group success in the face of collective failure: herd mentality, the reptile brain, boys will be boys, greed is good, lack of political will, tragedy of the commons.

In my view, there are three primary challenges for global social theory in the first quarter of the twenty-first century: (i) establishing the appropriate boundary—temporal and spatial—of inquiry; (ii) articulating an appropriate entry point; and (iii) committing to reflexivity in pursuit of truth claims.<sup>8</sup> While the first two are matters of ontology, the third is fundamentally about epistemology. In my view, making sense of the current world (dis)order is more than just a question of recognizing “blind spots” or putting a stop to willful blindness, though these are important endeavours. The challenge is to find a way to persuade ourselves that commitment to prevailing theoretical frameworks, be they orthodox or critical, marks a dead end for humanity. The signposts of an imminent “dead end” are everywhere, but most clearly marked by biodiversity loss, described by some as the “sixth mass extinction.”<sup>9</sup>

The challenges for social theory related to ontology (ways of saying) and epistemology (ways of knowing) emerge from a series of traps into which human community has fallen: (i) an Enlightenment trap, (ii) a progress trap, (iii) a luxury trap, and (iv) a commitment trap. When these are taken together, it is virtually impossible to rationalize

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8. Where “reflexive” is understood to mean that the theorist acknowledges their own position in constructing empirical reality. This contrasts with positivist claims of being able to stand outside of, or apart from, that which is to be explained. For example, for Martin Hollis, “In Newtonian mechanics and physics there are absolute laws of nature, holding universally and necessarily in all places and times, and forces which drive the natural world irresistibly.” Positivist and empiricist social theory claims to search for, so as to reveal, these universal truths. A reflexive position, in contrast, recognizes that the known world is subject to human interpretation—affected by, for example, the research questions that get asked. These questions in turn may be affected by biases held not only by the researcher but by the funding agency supporting the research. See Martin Hollis, *The Philosophy of Social Science: An Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 13.

9. Anthony D. Barnosky, Nicholas Matzke, Susumu Tomiya, Guinevere O.U. Wogan, Brian Swartz, Tiago B. Quental, Charles Marshall, Jenny L. McGuire, Emily L. Lindsey, Kaitlin C. Maguire, Ben Mersey, and Elizabeth A. Ferrer, “Has the Earth’s sixtieth mass extinction already arrived?” *Nature* 471, no. 3 (2011): 51–57; Ryan Katz-Rosene and Matthew Paterson, *Thinking Ecologically about the Global Political Economy* (London: Routledge, 2018); Elizabeth Kolbert, *The Sixth Extinction: An Unnatural History* (New York: Henry Holt, 2014).

our way out of our late-modern predicament. Only a willingness to reimagine the “probably impossible,”<sup>10</sup> to see and say differently, will assist us with the current intellectual/practical impasse. In support of this argument, the paper proceeds as follows. The next section focuses on epistemology and ontology, highlighting their central role in theory building. The essay then turns to an interrogation of the roots of “blindness” and “ignorance,” to use Best’s and Larsson’s terms, before presenting some modest proposals on a meaningful way forward for both the theory and practice of global political economy. As will be demonstrated below, while mainstream theory described as metanarratives persists despite its limited utility for fostering positive change, there are nevertheless numerous conceptual and theoretical entry points for moving in a fundamentally different direction. Whether these challengers can displace orthodox theory is questionable, as narratives surrounding events in Ukraine testify. To invoke yet another aphorism, “might makes right.”

## Words matter: Epistemology and ontology

According to the Stanford Dictionary of Philosophy, epistemology is “the study of knowledge and justified belief.”<sup>11</sup> Put differently, it focuses on the question, “How do we know what we know and why do we believe it to be the truth?” Epistemology, therefore, is linked to methodology, and sometimes the two terms are elided: epistemology. What is important for us is the link between epistemology and ontology. According to the Stanford Dictionary of Philosophy, “at a first approximation, ontology is the study of what is.” For example, it deals with questions such as “Is there a God?”<sup>12</sup> Related to this “first approximation” is the language we devise to discuss such questions, and the discourse this gives rise to over time. Discourse should be understood to mean “a mode of organizing knowledge, ideas, or experience that is rooted in language and its concrete contexts (as history of institutions).”<sup>13</sup> Let us take, for example, one of the enduring questions of international relations theory: why do humans wage war? The discursive framework within which we discuss a question such as “Why is there war?” is itself a limiting factor to our ability to understand the concept or to move beyond conventional wisdoms, beliefs, and the factual evidence collected

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10. “We need, in Runciman’s judicious phrasing most pertinent to International Relations, to distinguish the ‘improbably possible’ from the ‘probably impossible.’ This involves the double assertion—one intellectual, the other sociological: the intellectual revolves around a reassertion, chastened by history and critique alike, of the values associated with the Enlightenment; the sociological involves an assertion that, within the constraints of the contemporary world, and of that modernity which characterizes it, purposive action, linked to agency by individuals, movements and states alike, is possible.” Fred Halliday, “The potentials of Enlightenment,” *Review of International Studies* 25, no. 5 (1999): 108.
  11. Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, “Epistemology,” <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/epistemology/> (accessed 12 January 2023).
  12. Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, “Logic and ontology,” <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/logic-ontology/> (accessed 12 January 2023).
  13. Merriam-Webster Dictionary, “Discourse,” <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/discourse>

along particular lines of inquiry over time. For example, when speaking about the causes of war, we almost invariably begin from a number of (possibly unconsciously held) premises: (i) men are violent; (ii) resources are limited; (iii) the nation-state is often governed by unpredictable or impulsive rulers; (iv) the interstate system is organized around the notion of self-regarding states pursuing their own interests, so conflict is inevitable; (v) it is imperative that people arm themselves to deter invasion by others. Carefully examine the language used: man, resources, states, systems, self-help, arms. Given these premises, and the conceptual vocabulary available to us, it seems impossible to arrive at any other conclusion than “war is inevitable.” But what if we began from a different set of premises—equally valid through empirical investigation: (i) humans are communally oriented; (ii) the resources necessary for everyone to live a healthy and meaningful life are abundant; (iii) the state is only one of many social forms wherein humans have organized their affairs over time; (iv) states are capable of positive collective action, and with technological change people are cooperating with each other irrespective of “sovereign boundaries”; (v) while difficult, cooperation and relatively equitable and sustainable resource sharing at very large scales is possible. Here we have an entirely different conceptual vocabulary—one which makes peace seem more likely than war.

Even so, these slightly different ontological approaches commit to a bounded realm of states, militaries, and power as domination, and thus search for ways and means to explain and predict a state-centric world order.<sup>14</sup> Anarchy, whether viewed as a fact or as a social construct,<sup>15</sup> is still the primary operational principle of the “system of states.” Implicit is a hierarchy based on specific state criteria such as resource endowments, GDP per capita, nuclear weapons, industrial capacity, information technology, and knowledge production. Such a conceptualization of world order limits our ability to question the adequacy of the boundary of inquiry. Farhana Sultana goes further, labelling such a Western-centric approach to knowledge as “epistemicide.”<sup>16</sup> In regard to the climate crisis, Sultana argues that “[e]pistemological and ontological work is needed to confront the universalization and Eurocentrism in how climate is presented and understood, filtered through colonial science and gaze, differential valuation of human and non-human life and systems across Eurocentric and Other spaces.”<sup>17</sup> This critique may be extended broadly to many branches of social scientific inquiry.

[C]oncepts of ecocide and epistemicide help further clarify how knowledges were erased and devalued, but in need of recovering and reconstituting. Epistemic violence rooted in colonialism and Eurocentrism is not simply rooted in ideology, but material harms in the

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14. For example, see Jack S. Levy, “The causes of war and the conditions of peace,” *Annual Review of Political Science* 1: 139–165.

15. Alexander Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

16. Farhana Sultana, “The unbearable heaviness of climate coloniality,” *Political Geography* 99 (2022).

17. *Ibid.*, 8.

creation of the Other. ... Epistemic violence can also include silence, whereby erasing or excluding of testimony and evidence of erasures and harm become routine. Epistemicide and genocide are historically linked ... as it is to the violence against women ... and nature. ... While epistemic erasures ... are not uncommon, recovering Southern epistemologies have been written about ... although who speaks for whom has also been problematized.<sup>18</sup>

As with theories of international relations and of global political economy, theories of international development have long been engaged in an inter-paradigm debate, understood as fundamental disagreements regarding the theoretical foundation of analysis.<sup>19</sup> In one way, this debate facilitates discussion across the globe. But in other ways, it limits our ability to theorize all possible worlds. Dependency theory arose as a reaction to the failures of modernization theory. Both depend on a statist ontology—a language centred on the nation-state, citizens, sovereignty, treaties and laws, war, peace, and trade—to explain the world as they see it. But, interestingly, they do not see the same world at all. The difference may be explained by assumptions regarding the operational principles within each theoretical framework. Modernization, steeped in classic liberal analysis, views states, like individuals, as self-regarding independent units. As with the individual in liberal theory, states are agents of their own destinies whose actions and interactions create a structure—in this case, the system of states. In contrast, for dependency theorists, states are connected through the interests of dominant social classes, described as the “core of the core” and the “core of the periphery.”<sup>20</sup> While some regard dependency theory as laden with unwieldy jargon, the goal for dependency theorists is to develop an ontology that more accurately explains the world as they see it. The emphasis for dependency theorists is on the way sub-units within a system of states—i.e., elites (“core of the core,” “core of the periphery”)—are linked, so co-creating a structure quite different from that described by liberal analysts. Thus, modernizationists explain “Third World poverty” as internally derived, through bad governance, corruption, resource scarcity (or abundance) and so on. Dependency theorists, in contrast, explain the same phenomenon as being largely externally derived, through unequal terms of trade which nevertheless provide ample reward for the “core of the periphery,” i.e., those influential actors within the state. Within each of these generic “camps,” there are countless variations. Who speaks the truth? And how do we know it to be so?

Since the 1990s, mainstream macro-theoretical debates (in IR, liberal institutionalist versus neo/realist; in GPE, market-led versus state-led) have become the subject of sustained critique,

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18. Ibid.

19. See David B. Moore and Gerald J. Schmitz, *Debating Development Discourse: Institutional and Popular Perspectives* (Basingstoke, UK: Macmillan, 1995); Gustavo Esteva and Arturo Escobar, “Post-development @25: on ‘being stuck’ and moving forward, sideways, backward and otherwise,” *Third World Quarterly* (2017); and Jeffrey Sachs, *The Age of Sustainable Development* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015).

20. Johan Galtung, “A structural theory of imperialism,” *Journal of Peace Research* 8, no. 2 (1971): 81–117.

being accused of gender-blindness, Eurocentrism, and the instrumentalization/commodification of nature, to name but three prominent avenues of criticism.<sup>21</sup> These self-labelled “subaltern studies”<sup>22</sup> are deliberately disruptive, acting as the intellectual equivalent of social movements such as the Greta Thunberg-led #FridaysForFuture and the Indigenous people’s movement #IdleNoMore. In mainstream studies of IR, G/IPE, and International Development, these social and intellectual movements are regularly disciplined through their inclusion as “contemporary issues in...”. As these deliberate attempts at indisciplinism grow in number, so too do the final sections of IR and G/IPE textbooks, adding “gender and...”, then “environment and...”, and more recently “Indigenous peoples and...”, as well as “post-colonial approaches to...”. The message is that these “innovative approaches” to global studies are to be safely grouped together as additions to the canon, not fundamental challenges to theorizing world order.<sup>23</sup>

## Explanations of (dis)order

Most contemporary theories of international relations, international security, and global political economy give prominence to the concept “globalization” and generally use the end of the Cold War as a temporal point of departure when seeking to explain “world order.” From this temporal point, the theorist may move backward or forward, seeking to explain the current moment either in terms of continuation or departure. For example, liberal triumphalism characterized the post-Cold War era as the “End of History”—i.e., as the culmination of a long period of contestation resulting in the triumph of liberal democracy and capitalist market economies.<sup>24</sup> In contrast, Marxist and neo-Marxist theorization argued that the 1990s marked not a fundamental break but a reorganization within capitalist world order.<sup>25</sup> Orthodox liberal theories of GPE describe the depth, intensity, and changing character of production and consumption under globalization without ever challenging the facts of states or markets. As such, these theories are largely ahistorical, so the many (political, social, and ecological) crises to emerge over the last thirty years are most often explained by general system characteristics

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21. Sultana, “The unbearable heaviness of climate coloniality”; Katz-Rosene and Paterson, *Thinking Ecologically*; Halliday, “The potentials of enlightenment.”

22. Subaltern studies were founded in “an explosive discontent” not only with the lived realities of marginalized people across South Asia, but with the received colonial narratives explaining these people and their lives to themselves. See Ranajit Guha, “Subaltern studies: Projects for our time and their convergence,” in Ileana Rodriguez and Maria Milagros Lopez, eds., *The Latin American Subaltern Studies Reader* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001), 36.

23. A good example is Karen Mingst and Heather McKibben, wherein chapters 1–7 cover the canon of orthodox IR, while chapters 8–12 move toward topics less central to the mainstream, including “The environment” (chapter 11) and “Human security: Population, migration and global health” (chapter 12). See Karen A. Mingst and Heather Elko McKibben, *Essentials of International Relations*, 9<sup>th</sup> ed. (New York: WW Norton & Company, 2021).

24. Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Avon Books, 1992).

25. Leo Panitch and Sam Gindin, *The Making of Global Capitalism: The Political Economy of American Empire* (London: Verso, 2011).



(e.g., “boom” and “bust” cycles) and/or meso-level factors (e.g., over- or under-regulation, inefficient allocation of resources, corruption, natural disasters, or human folly). Critical approaches counter that far from having arrived at “the end of history,” humanity seems to be at the tipping point of the end of civilization.

To be sure, the triad of recent crises—Covid-19, conflict in the Ukraine, and climate change—has resulted in countless studies, each of which aims to explain cause, effect, linkage (if any), actions taken, and what to make of it all.<sup>26</sup> Rather than shed new light, explanations arrange themselves in line with accepted narratives, fitting events within accepted theoretical frameworks. For example, where global security is concerned, John Mearsheimer’s classically realist critique of US foreign policy toward Europe currently functions as a pivot point for both support and critique (strong and weak) of US policy, and as an explanation of shifts in world order. For Mearsheimer, explaining Russia’s invasion of Ukraine begins and ends with “great power politics.”<sup>27</sup>

In 1984, J.F. Lyotard famously defined post-modernism as “incredulity toward metanarratives.”<sup>28</sup> Nevertheless, the inability of “grand narratives” to solve collective action problems stands in stark contrast to their persistence in academia, policy-making, (social) media, and daily life. Particular meta-theoretical narratives—e.g., modernization, neoliberal globalization, or the anarchical state system—serve particular interest groups while deepening the crises of late-modern development.<sup>29</sup> These narratives constitute what Michel Foucault labelled “regimes of truth,” where assumptions derived from ideological positions serve as uncontested operational principles with which most of us, consciously or unconsciously, concur.<sup>30</sup>

In global development, meta-organizing concepts such as the sustainable development goals (SDGs) establish the contexts wherein a wide range of stakeholders compete for resources and to drive agendas in a particular direction.<sup>31</sup> While claiming

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26. Sara Stevano, Tobias Franz, Yannis Dafermos, and Elisa Van Waeyenberge, “COVID-19 and crises of capitalism: Intensifying inequalities and global responses,” *Canadian Journal of Development Studies* 42, no. 1–2 (2021): 1–17.

27. John J. Mearsheimer, “Playing with fire in Ukraine: The underappreciated risks of catastrophic escalation,” *Foreign Affairs*, 17 August 2022. See also Isaac Chotiner, “Why John Mearsheimer blames the U.S. for the crisis in Ukraine,” *The New Yorker*, 1 March 2022.

28. Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Post-Modern Condition: A Report in Knowledge* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984).

29. Katz-Rosene and Paterson, *Thinking Ecologically*; Kolbert, *The Sixth Extinction*; Wolfgang Streeck, *How Will Capitalism End? Essays on a Failing System* (London: Verso, 2016).

30. Foucault defines a regime of truth as “the types of discourse [a society] harbours and causes to function as true; the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true from false statements, the way in which each is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures which are valorised for obtaining truth; the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true. ... [Truth is connected] by a circular relation to systems of power which produce and sustain it, and to effects of power which it induces and which redirect it.” Michel Foucault, “The political function of the intellectual,” *Radical Philosophy* 17 (Summer 1977): 13, 14.

31. William Easterly, “The SDGs should stand for Senseless, Dreamy, Garbled,” *Foreign Policy*, 28 September 2015.

to be a “broad church” supporting “global goals,” the theoretical foundations of the SDGs are firmly anchored to liberal democratic and capitalist foundations. Moreover, at the level of development practice there has been a deliberate turn toward the micro; hence, “theories of change,” results-based management, and sustainable livelihood frameworks focus primarily on individuals and “communities.” If such approaches are informed by macro-theoretical frameworks, they are rarely explicitly stated.<sup>32</sup>

Numerous other approaches, frameworks, and concepts, operating at a variety of scales, offer interesting insights into the causes and consequences of social dynamics. Antonio Gramsci’s observation regarding the crisis of capitalism between the two World Wars continues to motivate a great deal of critical social theory:<sup>33</sup> “the crisis [of global capitalism] consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear.”<sup>34</sup> The “interregnum” is a useful heuristic device. It helps us envision cycles of change, find our place within these cycles, and so explain what may otherwise appear to be a confusing array of unconnected socio-ecological phenomena. Similarly, world systems theory tracks the long waves of capitalist development and change,<sup>35</sup> and resilience theory highlights the socio-ecological adaptive cycle of growth, decay, reorganization, and rebirth.<sup>36</sup> Typical of grand theories, elegance of explanation generally lacks an obvious means for action. Nonetheless, grand theories’ added value is the way they push temporal and spatial boundaries, setting forth new ontological and epistemological ways of seeing, saying, and knowing.

It is arguably no accident that four decades of neoliberalism have coincided with theoretical proliferation and increasingly fragmented social mobilization on the political left. With each passing decade, there are yet more attempts to explain and therefore uncover the means to change (racial, sexual, ethnic, ageist, ableist, and/or intersectional) oppression, dispossession, marginalization, and environmental decay at every imaginable social, spatial, and temporal scale. At the same time, capitalism’s

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32. Olivier Serrat, “Theories of change,” in O. Serrat, ed., *Knowledge Solutions* (Manila: Asian Development Bank, 2017), 237–243; William Solesbury, *Sustainable Livelihoods: A Case Study of the Evolution of DFID Policy – Working Paper 217*, June 2003 (London: ODI).

33. Former York University professor Robert Cox inspired an entire school of what might be called neo-Gramscian social theory. See Robert W. Cox, “Social forces, states and world orders: beyond international relations theory,” *Millennium* 10, no. 2 (1981): 126–155; Robert Cox, *Production, Power and World Order: Social Forces in the Making of History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987); Robert Cox, “Beyond empire and terror: Critical reflections on the political economy of world order,” *New Political Economy* 9, no. 3 (2004): 307–323.

34. *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*, ed. and trans. by Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1971), 276.

35. Immanuel Wallerstein, *World-Systems Analysis: An Introduction* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004); Immanuel Wallerstein, *The Modern World-System* (New York: Academic Press, 1974).

36. Brian Walker and David Salt, *Resilience Thinking: Sustaining Ecosystems and People in a Changing World* (Washington: Island Press, 2006).

imminent demise is similarly theorized<sup>37</sup> and strategized.<sup>38</sup> While feminist, queer, and environmental approaches aim at transformation,<sup>39</sup> liberal theoretical frameworks continue to emphasize reform.<sup>40</sup>

### Three challenges for theory

As stated in the introduction, in my view there are three primary challenges for global social theory in the first quarter of the twenty-first century:

- (i) Establishing the appropriate boundary—temporal and spatial—of inquiry

Theory depends on boundaries. The theorist must delineate that which is to be explained by demarcating its physical and temporal elements. Theories of IR and I/GPE seek to explain world order, or to explain phenomena at a different spatial/temporal scale that presumes a set of assumptions regarding world order. As argued above, most IR and G/IPE theory creates a “states +” reality where the dominant actors are the state, civil society, and the private sector. The interrelationship among these actors explains international relations/global political economy. The dynamic force is “power” wielded in service of particular (personal, corporate, collective, or national) interest(s). Power is explained in a variety of ways, depending on the theoretical point of departure, but can generally be seen to operate through ideas (e.g., the “free market,” “democracy,” “nationalism,” and “justice”), institutions (e.g., sovereign states, non-governmental and civil society organizations, and International Financial Institutions), and material forms (e.g., money, guns, information, social protest, and organizational capacity).

Conceptual innovation seeks to describe and explain new phenomena, or to encourage new ways of knowing, and to explain “success” and “failure” (written with quotation marks because these will be relative phenomena). But where to begin the story? At the beginning of the Holocene? At the emergence of Homo Sapiens? At the start of the carbon-intensive energy age? From the onset of the so-called “voyages of discovery”? Where to start with human nature relative to nurture: with the reptile brain?

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37. Lynn Stout, *The Shareholder Value Myth* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2012); Streeck, *How Will Capitalism End?*

38. John Holloway, *Crack Capitalism* (London: Pluto, 2010); Panitch and Gindin, *The Making of Global Capitalism*.

39. Cynthia Weber, “From queer to queer IR,” *International Studies Review* 16, no. 4 (2014): 596–601; Paterson, “Climate change and international political economy”; Jindy Pettman, *Worlding Women: A Feminist International Politics* (New York: Routledge, 1996); V. Spike Peterson, “Transgressing boundaries: Theories of knowledge, gender and international relations,” *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 21, no. 2 (1992): 183–206.

40. Kurt Anderson, *Evil Geniuses: The Unmaking of America: A Recent History* (New York: Random House, 2020); A. Giridharadas, *Winners Take All: The Elite Charade of Changing the World* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2018); Mariana Mazzucato, *The Value of Everything: Making and Taking in the Global Economy* (New York: Public Affairs, 2018); Sachs, *The Age of Sustainable Development*.

And where to start with human social organization (and organized violence): from the development of tools? These hypothesized boundaries differ markedly from mainstream approaches which, as noted several times already, involve states and markets as units of analysis wherein particular actors wield various forms of material and institutional power, a boundary of inquiry that seems impervious to both criticism and rational argument.

(ii) Articulating an appropriate entry point

Impervious though the mainstream may seem, those interested in transformational change must continue to probe for possible points of entry.<sup>41</sup> Approaches that challenge the dominant discourse at whatever level are invaluable tools in helping to re-theorize IR and G/IPE for the second quarter of the twenty-first century. In my view, the current turn toward the decolonization of knowledge is of fundamental importance to this project. That this approach struggles to find purchase in the mainstream speaks to its emancipatory epistemological potential. Put differently, Indigenous world views which place the individual within community and humans within nature, and set out “management plans” for seven generations, perform key moves in disrupting “rational man,” “man-over,” and “election cycle” thinking and practice. In the 1980s and 90s, innovations in IR G/IPE theorizing emerged from feminist interventions which aimed to change the lens through which particular world events were interpreted.<sup>42</sup> Taken-for-granted concepts such as the state were also brought in for scrutiny.<sup>43</sup> About the same time, “the environment” was proffered as an appropriate entry point for thinking about security.<sup>44</sup> Although most of these approaches were either marginalized from, or domesticated by, the mainstream, all offered glimpses of a different way of organizing and explaining social phenomena, in particular by problematizing the very concepts held sacred by mainstream scholars.<sup>45</sup>

(iii) Committing to reflexivity in pursuit of truth claims

In theorizing global social change, to ask “Whose values matter most?” is to commit a felony against positivist methodologies. In my view, an abiding challenge—perhaps

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41. To paraphrase John Holloway, there are many cracks in the edifice of global capitalism, and where there are cracks, there are points of entry. See Holloway, *Crack Capitalism*.

42. Pettman, *Worlding Women*.

43. Peterson, *Transgressing boundaries*.

44. See Larry A. Swatuk, “Environmental security,” in Michele M. Betsill, Kathryn Hochstetler, and Dimitris Stevis, eds, *Advances in International Environmental Politics*, 2nd ed. (Palgrave: Macmillan, 2014), 211–244.

45. See, for example, Simon Dalby, *Anthropocene Geopolitics: Globalization, Security, Sustainability* (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 2020).

the most pernicious of the three challenges outlined here—is to disrupt mainstream social theories’ attempts to mimic the natural and physical sciences. Following Teodor Adorno,<sup>46</sup> I am not recommending the abandonment of empirical methodologies, only their supplementation “by a theory of society and by reflexive and historical understanding.”<sup>47</sup> By theory of society, I am further recommending a dialectical, as opposed to linear, approach that recognizes that societies do not progress in straight lines based on improved knowledge and commitment to the truth, but are as likely to turn back upon themselves—i.e., “collapse”—due to foreseen and unforeseen phenomena.<sup>48</sup> Collapse, for Yuval Harari,<sup>49</sup> is an entirely normal social phenomenon, historically taking place at a sub-planetary scale but recently hypothesized to be a planetary-wide possibility. Importantly, as noted by Ryan Katz-Rosene and Matthew Paterson, our way of knowing must reintroduce theories of global social change to ecology.<sup>50</sup> The dialectical relationship between ecology and society must find its way to the centre of theory and practice. As noted by David Harvey, “All ecological projects (and arguments) are simultaneously political-economic projects (and arguments) and vice versa.”<sup>51</sup> Yet mainstream IR and G/IPE assign “the environment,” “ecology,” and “the biosphere” specific roles as forces and factors in (global) social change, but rarely if ever as “actors” or, as Jane Bennett describes animate and inanimate nature, “actants.”<sup>52</sup>

The epistemological challenge for us all as theorists of global social change is to dismantle humanity’s myth of dominance and control. While many laud the Pope for his environmentally sensitive encyclical, the fact remains that Judao-Christian teaching, like social theory, puts the social before the ecological. This challenge confronts not only mainstream theories and theorists but critical perspectives as well. Seeing the dialectical relationship between humans and nature is essential. “The problem with not recognizing this duality, with not calling it out and holding it down as a central theoretical foundation, is that global environmental problems (and thus their proposed “solutions”) become separated from their political-economic foundations, and vice versa (political-economic analyses and proposals become conceptually removed from their ecological consequences).”<sup>53</sup>

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46. Teodor W. Adorno, “On the logic of the social sciences,” in T.W. Adorno et al., eds, *The Positivist Dispute in German Sociology* (London: Heinemann, 1976): 105–122.

47. Philip Wexler and Laurence Parker, “Critical theory and sociology: Comment on Van Den Berg’s ‘critical theory,’” *American Journal of Sociology* 88, no. 6 (1983): 1250.

48. Jared Diamond, *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Survive* (London: Taylor and Francis, 2017).

49. Yuval N. Harari, *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind* (New York: HarperCollins, 2014).

50. Katz-Rosene and Paterson, *Thinking Ecologically*; also, Simon Dalby, *Security and Environmental Change* (Cambridge: Polity, 2009).

51. David Harvey, “The nature of environment: The dialectics of social and environmental change,” in *The Socialist Register 1993: Real Problems, False Solutions* 29 (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1993): 25.

52. Jane Bennett, “The force of things: Steps toward an ecology of matter,” *Political Theory* 32, no. 3 (2003): 347–372.

53. Katz-Rosene and Paterson, *Thinking Ecologically*, 3–4.

## Trapped

The challenges for global social theory are sometimes described as “wicked problems,” where recognition is not enough to escape the series of traps into which human community has fallen, of which there are four that seem to reinforce existing boundaries of social inquiry: an Enlightenment trap, a progress trap, a luxury trap, and a commitment trap. Each of these will be described in turn.

### (i) An Enlightenment trap

The Enlightenment trap reflects the separation of “Man” from “Nature” and is what John Seymour labels “the ultimate heresy.”<sup>54</sup> While the belief that humans (“Man”) are separate from, and superior to, nature is rooted in the millennia-long rise of settled agricultural societies and the move to monotheism, it was the period between 1400–1800 CE in Europe where the separation became entrenched in scientific and philosophical thought and practice. This is perhaps most famously expressed in terms of Rene Descartes’ thesis regarding rational/thinking Man and non-rational/“brutish” Nature. A powerful case has been made that this dualism provided the justification for the subjugation of other people, places, and things through European “voyages of discovery.”<sup>55</sup> Modern social organization is founded on principles of separation: humans from nature; the social sciences from the physical sciences; one gender from another. Where “nature” is concerned, governments around the world believe that it can be attended to by a department of environmental affairs, or a ministry of tourism and the environment. It is something apart from the daily concerns of domestic politics and statecraft. Economics locates the environment within the general discourse of production, where nature is almost wholly commodified, an element of private or common property, something to be bought or sold, managed, measured, and monitored. The endless parsing of material life into smaller and smaller areas of thought and practice makes it difficult to return to the “whole.” Yet, regarding the Earth as ripe for “planet management”<sup>56</sup> reinforces the notion of separation between a non-self-regarding planet and its self-regarding human stewards. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change Working Group II AR6 report places emphasis on the many risks deriving from interactions across three “coupled systems”—climate, ecosystems (including their biodiversity), and human society.<sup>57</sup> The language of risk (and reward)—via if/then

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54. John Seymour, *The Ultimate Heresy* (Cambridge: Green Books, 1992); also, Lynn White, “The historical roots of our ecological crisis,” *Science* (1967): 1203–1207.

55. Clive Ponting, *A Green History of the World: The Environment and the Collapse of Great Civilizations* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1991); Alfred W. Crosby, *Ecological Imperialism: The Biological Expansion of Europe, 900–1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

56. Ronald Wright, *A Short History of Progress* (Toronto: Macmillan, 2004).

57. IPCC (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change), *Climate Change 2022: Impacts, Adaptation and Vulnerability. Summary for Policymakers: Working Group II contribution the Sixth Assessment Report*, <https://www.ipcc.ch/report/ar6/wg2/> (accessed 27 September 2022).

scenario building—is directly pitched at policymakers, encourages action, and implies that humans remain in control. They are part of a set of coupled systems but still apart from nature.

(ii) A progress trap

The idea of progress underpins all modern life. Sydney Pollard defined progress as “the assumption that a pattern of change exists in the history of mankind ... that consists of irreversible changes in one direction only, and that this direction is towards improvement.”<sup>58</sup> Ronald Wright describes the “progress trap” as “a chain of successes which, upon reaching a certain scale, leads to disaster. The dangers are seldom seen before it’s too late. The jaws of a trap open slowly and invitingly, then snap closed fast.”<sup>59</sup> There are numerous ways to measure the socio-ecological calamity that is unfolding before us.<sup>60</sup> Let us just take one marker, biodiversity loss: according to Wright, “of all land mammals and birds alive today [2019], humans and their livestock make up 96 per cent of the biomass; wildlife has dwindled to four per cent. This has no precedent. Not so far back in history the proportions were the other way round. As recently as 1970, humans were only half and wildlife more than twice their present numbers.”<sup>61</sup> As the science sharpens our understanding of the consequences of neoliberal capitalist exploitation, discussions about what must be done continue to be dominated by discourses of market forces and oxymorons such as “transformational reform.”

(iii) A luxury trap

Harari describes a luxury trap as the almost imperceptible shift of an expensive, relatively scarce commodity from a luxury item into a necessity.<sup>62</sup> The item takes on new importance through a narrative of “making life easier.” Take, for example, transportation—in particular, vehicle ownership. In 1960, there were 292 vehicles per 1,000 population in Canada. In 2002, this had risen to 581 per 1,000 population. Similarly, in the United States, the numbers were 411 per 1,000 in 1960 and 812 per 1,000 in 2002.<sup>63</sup> Joyce Dargay, Dermot Gately, and Martin Sommer estimate that “the total vehicle stock will increase from about 800 million in 2002 to over 2 billion units in

58. Sydney Pollard, *The Idea of Progress: History and Society* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971), 9.

59. Ronald Wright, “Can we still dodge the progress trap?” *The Tyee*, 20 September 2019, <https://thetyee.ca/Analysis/2019/09/20/Ronald-Wright-Can-We-Dodge-Progress-Trap/> (accessed 20 January 2023).

60. Norman Myers, *The Gaia Atlas of Planet Management: For Today’s Caretakers of Tomorrow’s World* (New York: Pan Macmillan, 1985); IPCC, *Climate Change 2022*.

61. Wright, “Can we still dodge the progress trap?”

62. Harari, *Sapiens*.

63. Joyce Dargay, Dermot Gately, and Martin Sommer, “Vehicle ownership and income growth, worldwide: 1960–2030,” *The Energy Journal* 28, no. 4 (2007): 145.

2030.”<sup>64</sup> The rise of the mobile device tells an even more remarkable story, where the percentage of US adults who own a smartphone increased from 35 percent in 2011 to approximately 85 percent ten years later.<sup>65</sup> For Harari, “the luxury trap carries with it an important lesson. Humanity’s search for an easier life released immense forces of change that transformed the world in ways nobody envisioned or wanted.”<sup>66</sup>

In GIPE, the luxury trap is captured in statistics such as GDP, commodity and value chains, trade statistics, growth triangles and corridors, and so on. IR also focuses considerable attention on the globalization of production but from a waxing or waning powers perspective: Japan in the 1980s; new regionalisms in the 1990s; the Newly Industrializing(ed) Countries (NICs), BRICs,<sup>67</sup> and China in the 1990s up to today. Most recently, the impact of the IT revolution in shaping new forms of production and consumption occupies policy-makers, pundits, and researchers who regard knowledge as a key commodity, and platform capitalism as displacing established modes and relations of production. Put differently, IR and I/GPE are trapped in the analysis of a constant present of production, consumption, and what it means for social development and change now.

#### (iv) A commitment trap

The last of our traps is related to commitment—as academics, to our careers; as citizens, to our safety and security within pre-set parameters; as humans, to a common narrative where risk and reward are clearly defined; as winners or losers of a lived reality built upon a specific way of thinking, seeing, being, and doing. The deliberate non-saying among the empowered lies at the heart of the climate crisis. There is a rising chorus of voices among the uncommitted and/or differently positioned across society. Within academia, those with little to lose (tenured and aging) and everything to gain (new graduates, exploited part-time faculty) constitute a logical alliance to build better theory.

## Conclusion

To use Albert Hirschman’s imagery,<sup>68</sup> the growing “voice” of those most marginalized from the human security benefits of the current and projected future global order should not only be welcomed, but closer attention should be paid to it. While vast numbers rally around populist leaders in newly manufactured loyalty,<sup>69</sup> in a planetary-wide crisis, “exit” is not an option. Do we have the courage to say what we see, to re-theorize

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64. Ibid., 143.

65. See <https://www.statista.com/statistics/219865/percentage-of-us-adults-who-own-a-smartphone/> (accessed 27 September 2022).

66. Harari, *Sapiens*.

67. Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa.

68. Albert O. Hirschman, *Exit, Voice and Loyalty: Responses to Decline in Firms, Organisations and States* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1970).

69. For an interesting overview, see Outi Hakola, Janne Salminen, Jiho Turpeinen, and Oscar Winberg, eds, *The Culture and Politics of Populist Masculinities* (New York: Lexington Books, 2021).



the interregnum(s)? The combination of the four “traps” makes it highly unlikely that we will be able to rationalize our way out of our late-modern predicament. As resilience theory posits, only following collapse will there be reorganization.<sup>70</sup>

Nevertheless, it seems to me that we have the necessary tools to build better global theory. The inspiration for transformation in IR and G/IPE theory is many faceted, from a global pandemic to regional warfare, from millions of refugees on the march to ecosystem collapse, from rising economic inequality to an accelerating climate crisis. There is constant probing of both boundaries (beyond state and market) and entry points (from feminist, decolonial, differently abled, and critical outposts within established disciplines). As described above, ongoing crises regularly find homes within mainstream and critical theories, so the climate crisis, for example, becomes a Left-Right argument rather than a systematic probing of an existential challenge. The challenge for theory and theorists, then, is not to win an inter-paradigm debate but to go beyond it, with epistemological courage and, as Best and her colleagues put it, a “modest ontology more open to question and challenge.”<sup>71</sup>

Problem-solving theorizing will, and should, continue—we need to be sure that the bridges we build will not fall down, and that the vaccines we develop will work. Inter-paradigm debates, too, will and should continue: forcing the empowered to see that which they would rather ignore (through gendered, raced, decolonial, differently abled, subaltern lenses) is an essential ongoing project. Arguments amongst progressives will also continue, necessarily reflecting different ways of seeing and knowing. But the one thing upon which we should all agree is the recentring of humanity within nature. Inroads have been made in theory and practice.<sup>72</sup> For example, in most parts of the world, environmental and social impact assessments (EIAs and SIAs) must be undertaken before development projects (e.g., roads, bridges, or buildings) are undertaken. Similarly, ecosystem services, nature-based solutions, and green and circular economies are increasingly popular concepts and practices designed to ensure “sustainable development.”<sup>73</sup> Yet, these continue to put nature at the service of humanity, perhaps understandably so. Moreover, the way the Russian invasion of Ukraine shunted all other (Western and global) concerns to the side is testimony to the enduring power of Eurocentric and anthropocentric worldviews where the threat of physical force silences all other voices. Clearly, no one in Putin’s Russia conducted an EIA or SIA of the

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70. Brian H. Walker, John M. Anderies, Ann P. Kinzig, and Paul Ryan, “Exploring resilience in social-ecological systems through comparative studies and theory development: Introduction to the Special Issue,” *Ecology and Society* 11, no. 1 (2006): 12.

71. Best et al., “Seeing and not-seeing like a political economist”; LeBaron et al., “Blind spots in IPE.”

72. See, e.g., Dalby, *Anthropocene Geopolitics*; Matthias Wackernagel and William Rees, *Our Ecological Footprint: Reducing Human Impact on the Earth* (Philadelphia: New Society, 1996).

73. Roldan Muradian and Laura Rival, “Between markets and hierarchies: The challenge of governing ecosystem services,” *Ecosystem Services* 1 (2012): 93–100. Sometimes treated as different aspects of “ecological modernization,” these frameworks, concepts, and approaches are not without their critics. See Dana R. Fisher and William R. Freudenburg, “Ecological modernization and its critics: Assessing the past and looking toward the future,” *Society and Natural Resources* 14 (2001): 701–709.

invasion of Ukraine. “One world” is more than a cute aphorism, however: it is an undeniable fact. In a world where Elon Musk can “make” \$37 billion in a single day in the midst of a global pandemic while planning his “escape” to Mars, mustering the epistemological courage to challenge dominant narratives seems not too much to ask.

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