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# **Capturing the political? The role of political analysis in the multi-disciplining of development studies**

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**Abstract**

*This article analyses the recent resurgence of political analysis within international development. It argues that although new conceptual approaches have brought valuable insights concerning the links between popular agency, institutional politics and development possibilities, several problems remain. These include a tendency either to overlook or to under-theorise some important linkages between politics and development; a general reluctance to engage critically with the notion of development itself or to disaggregate key concepts such as 'poverty'; a reluctance to adopt insights from political economy perspectives, and a problematic tendency towards quantifying political phenomena. Overall, the contribution of political analysis to a genuinely multidisciplinary development studies turns on its capacity to reveal how 'the political' as well as 'politics' links to development, a task achieved most successfully in approaches that weave historical and political sociology perspectives into political analysis, and engage with critical theory.*

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## **1. Introduction**

‘...it has become commonplace to accept that “politics matters” for the successful pursuit of pro-poor policies. But what kind of political analysis is needed to fill out the gaps in understanding?’ (Whitehead and Gray-Molina 2003: 33).

The recent surge of political analysis within development studies forms an important dimension of current debates concerning the need for a more multidisciplinary approach to poverty analysis. This renewed interest has been broad, focusing on the various ways in which political processes, actors, institutions, events, ideologies and struggles inform the reproduction and reduction of poverty (Harriss 2000, Hossain and Moore 2001, Webster and Engberg-Pedersen 2002, Houtzager and Moore 2003). Heralding its onset, Toye (1999) initially argued that political science should become the pre-eminent discipline within development studies. Although there has since been little sign of this happening, the resurgence of political analysis has been notable and, as yet, subject to little critical reflection. This article starts by briefly locating the new politics and development turn in relation to broader shifts in development theory and policy. It then analyses the ways and extent to which a selection of the key conceptual approaches to political analysis – namely political capital, political capabilities, the polity approach and political space – contribute towards the multi-disciplining of development studies. This is followed by a composite analysis of these approaches, drawing together common themes, problems and comparative issues, before the conclusion returns to the issue of how political analysis can best contribute towards a more multi-disciplinary form of development studies.

## **2. Politics and the multi-disciplining of development**

The dominant paradigms and theoretical frameworks within development studies have tended not to accord ‘politics’ a primary role.<sup>2</sup> As argued by Petiteville (1998), it is notable that each of the dominant approaches to post-war development theory tended to forward a ‘mythical’ view of the state – ‘the developer state’ (modernisation), the ‘puppet state’ (dependency) and ‘the minimalist state’ (neoliberal theory) – none of which are grounded in political theory. The ‘political development’

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<sup>2</sup> See Goldsworthy (1989: fn2) for further critiques of the absence of politics from most development theory. As Tornquist (1999) offers an authoritative account concerning the trajectory of political analysis within development studies, this section will only briefly review the key moments.

dimension of modernisation theory was highly problematic, particularly in its tendency to view political systems and processes as somehow autonomous from the rest of society (Martinussen 1997: 168, also Cammack 1997). Within the structuralist accounts that emerged during the 1960s and 1970s, both dependency and world systems theory exaggerated the extent to which political institutions and processes within developing countries were subordinated to external economic relations. Over the 1980s and much of the 1990s, the state declined as a key focus within development theory and policy, under threat from globalisation and overlooked in favour of market-led and then civil society-focused debates (e.g. Schuurman 2000). With much of political science still tied to the state as its primary focus for analysis, the perceived relevance of its insights for development studies swiftly declined.

By the time that the state re-emerged as a more central focus within development policy in the late 1990s (e.g. World Bank 1997), it was primarily as a decentralised, slimmed-down, managerial institution charged with securing 'good governance'. Although some observers credited the good governance agenda with effectively putting 'politics back in the development paradigm' (Santiso 2001: 167), experiences to date challenge these claims. This agenda has tended to prioritise the technical over the political, focusing on state efficiency, rather than issues of 'state reform' or 'social and political change' (de Alcantara 1998: 107). Rather than extending understandings of how politics relate to poverty reduction, this aspect of political conditionality has been concerned with a different type of 'disciplining' to the 'multi-disciplining' of development discussed in this Special Issue, having more to do with correction and control (Williams 1996, Abrahamsen 2000).

The other approach initially credited with 'bringing politics back in', this time at the level of popular agency, has been the social capital and civil society paradigm. Here, organised citizens are framed as watchdogs on the errant state and as providing the links between democracy and development (e.g. Putnam 1993). Again, both concepts have been beset by charges that they fail to capture the politics of democratisation processes and collective action (e.g. Putzel 1997, Howell and Pearce 2001). For some, (e.g. Houtzager 2003, also Harriss et al 2004), the 'radical polycentrism' of the civil society paradigm has deepened the problem of 'democratic fragmentation', thus hindering progressive politics in the face of growing corporate monopolisation in the economic sphere. A particular problem concerns the exclusion of more political actors such as political parties, which 'remain among the weakest components of the democratisation process, and the least assisted from abroad'

(Santiso 2001: 163). Again, such concepts are charged with the further 'depoliticisation' of development studies (Harriss 2001), an insult compounded for some by the injurious sense that the rise of social capital has (once more) involved a disciplining of a different kind to that sought here, namely the continued colonisation of development studies by economics (Fine 1999).

The problems concerning attempts to bring politics into development studies are closely related to the disciplines underlying political economy and ideological norms. For example, its normative, policy-focussed character has led 'development' itself to be critiqued as an essentially depoliticising project (e.g. Ferguson 1994), whereby the historical and contextual features of 'developing' countries are air-brushed from view in order to provide a blank canvas onto which western-devised solutions can be painted, and in which the political can only be included insofar as it can be managed and controlled. More recently, the tendency to adopt a narrow understanding of politics reflect the broader ways in which 'third way' approaches to politics within the current neo-liberal hegemony (Porter and Craig 2003), tend to mobilise 'a view of politics which has evacuated the dimension of antagonism', and lacks any perspective concerning the power relations that structure societies (Mouffe 2000: 14).

Historically, political science has been 'heavily complicit in (this) modernising project' (Young 2003:1), with the political development approach revealing a tendency within the discipline 'dedicated to promoting the superior values of liberal pluralistic values' (Almond 1990: 18). This complicity between political science and the mainstream of donor-led development also appears to inform the wave of new approaches to politics and development discussed here. For example, two of the approaches discussed here emerged from papers that were originally commissioned by the UK Department for International Development, and used as background papers for the World Bank's (2000) landmark World Development Report 2000/1. However, pessimistic conclusions do not necessarily follow from this juxtaposition. Despite the critical dismissal of good governance and social capital, these moves appear to have opened up spaces within international development for discussions of power and politics that have not been closed down.<sup>3</sup> Some donors have been at the forefront of seeking improved approaches, with some evidence that their thinking has started to move beyond the technocratic and towards an understanding of the underlying

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<sup>3</sup> Moore (2003) forwards this argument at the general level, while the work of Corbridge et al (2005) and Bebbington et al (2004) make the case with reference to the good governance and social capital agendas respectively.

political forms and processes associated with longer-term processes of development (e.g. DFID 2003).

A useful way of capturing the required shift within politics and development, away from the technocratic and towards a more politicised view, is to draw on Chantal Mouffe's (1993) distinction between 'politics' and 'the political'. Here, *politics* refers to 'the ensemble of practices, discourses and institutions that seek to establish a sense of social order and organization', while *the political* constitutes 'the antagonistic dimension that is inherent in human societies and which is located within the struggles of diverse social groups for power and resources' (Mouffe, 1995, cited in Corbridge et al 2005: 257). As such, a benchmark for the new politics and development turn is the extent to which its conceptual approaches offer insights into how the political as well as politics shapes development.

### **3. New frames of analysis within the politics and development turn**

A window onto the politics and development turn, albeit a partial one, is offered by the series of conceptual approaches that have merged therein, and which claim to offer particular insights into the links between politics and development. These can be divided between those that look explicitly at issues of popular agency – such as *political capital* and *political capabilities* – and those that also seek to examine the broader institutional context within which agency operates – the *polity* and *political space* approaches.<sup>4</sup> The application of these new approaches to date has so far been limited, leaving any judgements necessarily limited in scope and finality. As such, the focus here is to critically assess their underlying as well as realised potential to 'bring politics back in' to development studies, based on an analysis of their underlying ontological, theoretical and methodological characteristics.

#### *Political capital*

The concept of political capital has become increasingly conceptualised in development studies as an extra dimension within the 'Livelihoods Framework' (e.g. Carney 1999), and defined as being 'based on access to decision-making' in the political process (Rakodi 1999: 318). Despite limited applications, it is accorded a high degree of explanatory power, such that political capital 'is one of the key capital assets on which people draw to build their livelihoods' (Baumann 2000: 6), and acts

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<sup>4</sup> For reasons of space, other conceptual approaches that have also been associated with the repoliticisation of development studies, such as citizenship (e.g. Gaventa 2002, Hickey and Mohan 2005), are not covered directly.

'as a gatekeeper asset, permitting or preventing the accumulation of other assets upon which successful poverty-reducing growth depends' (Booth et al 1998: 79, quoted in Rakodi 1999: 318). In a bid to overcome the 'localism' that has limited other approaches to popular agency in development studies (Mohan and Stokke 2000), political capital is linked directly to policy influence, such that it 'consists of the resources which an actor...can dispose of and use to influence policy formation processes and realise outcomes which are in an actor's perceived interest' (Birner and Wittner 2000: 6), with resources including political literacy, ideological resources, and civil and political rights.<sup>5</sup>

As yet, the concept of political capital lacks the historical elaboration that has been afforded social capital – in either a conceptual (Farr 2004) or institutional (Bebbington et al 2004) sense – and also the same semblance of analytical nuance with regards the different forms it might take (e.g. bridging, bonding). However, it is possible to discern two distinct approaches to its conceptualisation. The first (and predominant) approach draws on resource mobilisation theory (Birner and Wittner 2000), and concerns itself with the construction of political capital from different resources and its instrumental usage towards particular ends (developmental or otherwise). The second approach draws on the work of Pierre Bourdieu, and is more concerned with how power itself is constituted, and how agency is constrained and enabled vis-à-vis relations of power. These different approaches tend to produce different types of insights into the links between politics and development, and will be critically compared here.

The main focus within the first approach has been to examine the links between political capital and other capital assets (e.g. social, human, financial). One study of environmental struggles revealed how pro-poor organisations transformed their social capital (e.g. organisational density) into political capital through sustained and opportunistic campaigns (e.g. of electoral leverage, disruptive rallies and alliance-making), in ways that secured favourable policy outcomes (Birner and Wittner 2000). Similarly, Booth and Richard (1998: 782) argue that in order for associational activism in Central America to have political significance, it needs to go beyond social capital and 'foster attitudes and behaviors that actually influence regimes in some

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<sup>5</sup> Some studies have also suggested that the notion of political capital might be integrated into the livelihoods framework in order to help plan strategic entry points into policy processes (e.g. Hickey 2005a), thus 'moving the framework from analysis to action' (Baumann and Sinha 2001: 1).

way'. They found that high levels of social capital (e.g. communal-level activism) associated with lower levels of democracy, while formal group activism (e.g. unions) and higher levels of political capital (political participation and a commitment to democratic norms) were closely associated with higher levels of democracy.<sup>6</sup> A further quantitative study in Kenya 'proved' that district-level political capital shaped the distribution of public goods, whereby districts lacking representatives at the higher levels of government recorded relatively low human development indicators (Weinreb 2001: 453-3).<sup>7</sup> For some, political capital can form the key principle of differentiation in contexts where most forms of accumulation are controlled (Earle 1999: 180), as in China where membership of a political party (a proxy for political capital) has been strongly associated with significantly higher levels of income (Liu 2003), and also privileged access to public policy reforms (Raymo and Lie 2000). Finally, Baumann (2000) revealed how local government officials in India use their political capital to capture the financial benefits of anti-poverty programmes, and also secures their transfers to higher posts in the bureaucracy, thus further enhancing their political capital.

Overall, there is some validity in claims that political capital has extended livelihoods analysis in useful ways, particularly in terms of separating the social and the political, so as to better examine the links. However, the final study cited above – by Baumann – is instructive concerning any 'added value' that the notion brings to understanding the links between politics and development, given that these findings simply re-enforce the now familiar growing literature on elite capture within decentralisation reforms (e.g. Crook and Sverrisson 2001, Francis and James 2003). Moreover, the assets-based understanding of politics tends to reduce the political an instrumental form, and offer a standard 'rational actor' reading of politics of the type much critiqued by recent observers (e.g. Moore 2003). It is not clear that popular political agency can be reduced to into such atomised forms of manoeuvring (Bryceson and Bank 2001), devoid of any sense of the cultural importance invested in such struggles. The problems of this approach are revealed most fully when operationalised in quantitative research. As with the quantitative turn in social capital research (e.g. Narayan and Cassidy 2001), the disciplining of the political through methodological individualism into a form that can be surveyed by the dominant

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<sup>6</sup> Similar results were found in South Africa (Orkin 1995).

<sup>7</sup> It should be noted that this quantitative study employed a particularly unsophisticated understanding of ethnicity and patron-client politics, to the extent that its categorisations and conclusions cannot bear much explanatory weight.

discipline within development studies tends towards an essentially apolitical understanding of how agency operates, particularly vis-à-vis relations of power. So, despite claims that political capital helps to explain the power relations involving poor people (Baumann 2000: 6; Rakodi 1999: 318), the resource mobilisation approach tends to elide such issues.

It is here that Bourdieu's (1990) approach to 'capital' might contribute, drawing on his theory of how social and political practices 'are constituted by and constitute their dispositions (habitus), the capital they possess and the fields within which they operate' (Stokke 2002: 5).<sup>8</sup> Here, 'capital' is seen as a relational concept that invokes the Marxian tradition (Dyke 1999: 194), with 'political capital' viewed as 'a special form of political power and resources' (Xiaoju 2004: 6). This approach seeks to explain the ways in which such actors have influence in relation to the broader field of power relations (involving class, gender and other differences) in which they operate (e.g. Xiaoju 2004). Here, the success of collective actors in achieving their ends tends to be shaped by 'the constellation of forces within the political field, the volume and composition of social capital, and the possession of symbolic capital' (Stokke 2002: 21). For Harriss et al (2004), this approach re-politicises debates over local democratic politics in developing countries, and 'highlights the critical role of political parties' – the primary form that has 'accumulated a symbolic capital of recognition and loyalties and which has given itself for and through political struggle' (Bourdieu 1991: 194-5, quoted in Stokke 2002:13) – and also trade unions (Beckman 2004).

Although welcome, this move towards a closer understanding of power may prove insufficient in terms of securing a future for political capital within development studies. In the first place, it is not clear that Bourdieu's theory of practice, which he used primarily to explain the relationship of individuals to power-holders (Dyke 1999: 194), can be so readily applied to studies of collective action. Second, the level of (often justified) antipathy towards social capital within significant quarters of development studies suggests that any closely related concept probably will stir more controversy than it is (analytically) worth.

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<sup>8</sup> Here, 'habitus' (the dispositions that establish classificatory principles and organising principles of action that in turn generate practice) and the 'field' (a relational space of positions, occupied by actors, and the relations of power obtaining between those positions; political fields are characterised by a competition for the legitimate right to speak on behalf of others).

### *Political capabilities*

Political capabilities have been broadly defined 'as the institutional and organizational resources as well as collective ideas available for effective political action' (Whitehead and Gray-Molina 2003: 32). Here, political capabilities constitute 'a set of navigational skills needed to move through political space, and the tools to re-shape this space where this is possible' (Williams 2004: 95), and might be said to include 'personal political capabilities, self-confidence, capacity for community organisation, recognition of dignity, and collective ideas' (Moore and Putzel 1999: 13). Again, this approach marks a conscious attempt to bring politics into development studies, with Williams (2004) claiming it offers a means of 're-politicising' the theory and practice of participation in development and governance. More ambitiously, Moore (2003: 276) argues that it offers a 'superior' way of thinking about strategies for promoting political inclusiveness compared to 'empowerment', in that it draws attention to:

'...the longer term; the process of political learning; the ways in which ideas, identities and collective self-awareness that constitute valuable political resources in one context can be reframed to suit other contexts; and the importance of the intersection between the three arenas driving pro-poor policy-making – the institutional characteristics of the state; the organisational resources of the poor and the content of pro-poor policy-making itself'.

Drawing on the work of Amartya Sen, political capabilities arguably represents a logical and necessary extension of this approach, with critics noting that Sen's analysis 'would benefit from a theoretical grounding that explains the process through which the empowerment of disadvantaged groups occurs, and the social changes involved' (Hill 2003: 124). With its focus on collective action in securing long-term pro-poor change, rather than the strategising of individual entrepreneurs, the political capabilities approach to agency attempts to go beyond the individualism that pervades both the political capital approach and Sen's work (Gore 1997), and which blinds much liberal thinking to the constitutive role of antagonism and power (the political) in social life (Mouffe 1993). This move also undermines that pervasive and apolitical focus on the 'community' in development studies, and promises to open up development studies more fully to the rich literature on social movements and collective action.

The limited applications of political capabilities approach to date have been divided between quantitative and qualitative studies of what Amartya Sen has termed the 'evaluative' and 'agency' aspects of the capability approach. Here, the quantitative/evaluative approach aims to measure valued aspects of people's lives and assess progress along these dimensions (UNDP 2002), while the qualitative/agency approach (Whitehead and Gray-Molina 2003, Williams 2004), is concerned with 'what human beings can do to achieve such improvements, particularly through policy and political changes' (Fukuda-Parr 2003: 303). According to Whitehead and Gray-Molina (2003), pro-poor change within political systems needs to be analysed in relation to broader struggles between different social forces over resources and ideologies over time. For example, the inclusion of local peasant organisations in processes of governance since Bolivia's 1994 Law of Popular Participation in Bolivia (LPP) is related back to an earlier episode of broadly pro-poor policy-making, whereby the 1950s programme of agrarian reform led to the formation of peasant's organisations, that were able to take advantage of (and be further empowered through) later policy openings. Although the reading of the LPP offered by Whitehead and Gray-Molina is problematic in some important respects,<sup>9</sup> the emphasis on the political roots of collective action offers a more persuasive explanation than the more voluntaristic approach offered by social capital theory (Putzel 1997), and reveals the key role of government policy in casting the poor (or certain groups thereof) as legitimate citizens. The notion that collective memories of political action can inspire contemporary forms have also been evidenced during processes of democratisation in Africa over the past fifteen years, whereby the same associational forms – particularly hometown development associations – that emerged in the democratic openings of the late colonial era re-appeared (Geschiere and Gugler 1998).

The operationalisation of political capabilities through quantitative attitudinal surveys has arguably revealed fewer close insights into the politics of poverty reduction (UNDP 2002). Here, political capabilities have been conceived as: social capital; a commitment to the country; relative institutional trust; openness toward and commitment to change; and a willingness to deliberate. Co-relations revealed that a lack of commitment to the country rated most highly among the most advantaged socio-economic group, whereas the most disadvantaged classes see their fate as

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<sup>9</sup> For example, this study notably fails to recognise the extent to which this law empowered certain sections of the poor and marginal, while excluding women's groups who lack of rights to land (Jeppesen 2002).

tied to that of the country and believe in it for this reason. However, the cross-sectional nature of the data makes it impossible to go beyond correlates to more causal explanations, or to regain the historical insights that underpin the political capability approach (panel data on political capabilities may help here). As argued by Williams (2004: 95), understanding political capabilities should focus on 'what knowledges and performances are required to (re-) negotiate political space', rather than quantifying levels or producing institutional mappings of political capability.

However, although political capabilities has significantly more mileage than political capital as a concept – and also offers an important supplement to the growing rights-based approach in development (Nussbaum 2003: 36-40) – several problems are also apparent, some of which may be contingent on its relative newness as a concept, some which appear to be more intrinsic. With regards the former, the focus on political capabilities as emerging solely through the interactions of poor people with pro-poor policy-making needs to be extended to explore broader possibilities, including the possibility that repressive and anti-poor policies and might also help generate political capabilities through organised forms of resistance. More broadly, Moore (2003: 275) notes that the approach remains abstract and that 'those wishing to employ it for more analytic purposes need to find more operational definitions'. Although further reflection and empirical application may help here, the problem of vagueness is one that pervades the capability approach more generally (Pressman and Summerfield 2002: 431), and may not be easily resolved. Further problems also seem to be more intrinsic. First, there is a danger of over-emphasising the power of popular agency here, reflecting the wider failure to take power relations seriously within the capability approach (Hill 2003), although efforts to invoke Foucault as a means of reading the ways in which power works in participatory encounters may offer a way forward here (Williams 2004: 103). The second, and arguably greater constraint, concerns explicit efforts by proponents of political capabilities to restrict its usage, such that 'the analysis of political capabilities assumes national and sub-national politics in new democracies with reasonably stable boundaries and relatively coherent systems of public policy-making and implementation' (Whitehead and Gray-Molina 2003: 34). This methodological barrier effectively rules out large numbers of developing countries from analysis, a curious approach given the supposed relevance to issues of poverty reduction, and one that appears to re-assert the narrow concern of political development with 'political order' (Huntington 1968).

This stance is clearly inconsistent with the overall capability approach. Although Sen holds that a deepening of democracy will benefit the poor, he does not suggest that capability analysis is somehow of less relevance to countries lacking deep levels of democratisation – indeed, increased political capabilities would arguably contribute to this process. More generally, this would seem to be a peculiar approach to take for the comparative and international field of development studies. With particular reference to understanding politics in Africa, there is little evidence that unique forms of political analysis are required, and quite a lot to the contrary, as suggested by Bayart's (1993) call that 'exoticism be damned'. Mamdani (1996) has shown how the apparently 'eurocentric' notion of 'citizenship' can be used to offer a penetrative analysis of African politics, with his findings in turn used to analyse politics in Mexico (Perez-Bustillo 2001). This reflects not only the fact that citizenship, or membership of a *political community*, is grounded in that most primary of political concepts (Chabal 1992), but reveals an unnecessarily limited and limiting approach to comparative politics within political capability research.

#### *Polity approach*

Emerging from the same collaborative research effort as the political capabilities approach, the polity approach to political analysis has been described as '...a powerful analytical tool to help (development theorists and practitioners) think through how they might, directly or indirectly, help achieve the empowerment of the poor' (Moore 2003: 276). This move away from a direct focus on agency and towards the institutional characteristics of the state is heavily influenced by historical institutionalism, particularly the efforts of Theda Skocpol (1992) to analyse the political origins of American social policy. Here, the potential for purposeful change (pro-poor or otherwise), depends on 'the ways in which state and societal actors are constituted, become politically significant, and interact across the public-private divide' (Houtzager 2003: 13), which can in turn be understood as being shaped by four main components, namely: the relationship between state and societal actors and their capacities; the 'fit' between actors and the 'historically changing points of access and leverage allowed by a nation's political institutions' (which are determined by the degrees of centralisation and bureaucratisation); the fact that political institutions severely constrain the ability of actors to engineer this fit, and also influence which social groups coalesce into collective actors; and, finally, the sequenced episodes of mutual engagement (involving conflict and negotiation) or iterative struggles, that in turn influence later ones (Houtzager 2003: 14-18).







































