

Introduction: International Political Economy and the Global Environment

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Conventional approaches to political economy, both national and international, have traditionally focused upon matters relating to man and ignored interactions of humanity with nature, the effects of human action on natural environments, and the reaction of nature to human actions. Certainly this is no longer a defensible practice, either on theoretical or on empirical grounds. The profound dependence of humans on their natural environments—so taken for granted in biology, ecology, and other natural sciences—is only now beginning to be appreciated in the social sciences. And, most certainly, the traditional concerns of political economy cannot be ignored. New concerns do not invalidate the importance of older ones. At issue is the expansion of the frontiers of political economy and the extension of our common understanding of matters at the intersection of politics and economics.

Conventional perspectives on political economy need to be augmented—at times reformulated—to acknowledge an increasing appreciation of the interconnections between humans and nature, and of the basic reality that humans are part of, and not separate from, nature. The unifying theme of this issue, the criterion by which the essays were chosen, is a shared skepticism about the wisdom of conventional perspectives on international political economy.

The goals of this issue are modest. We focus on select problems of international political economy (IPE), not on the widest range, the full panoply of emerging issues. The problems addressed herein are of two types. Some fall within the more conventional bounds of the field as commonly understood, and others go beyond the traditional bounds to engage more directly new issues such as humanity/nature interconnections that may threaten natural environments and undermine the long-term ability of nature to withstand the assaults of man.

All of the essays, each in its own way, attempt the following: to focus on some particular dimension of conventional IPE that, in the author's view, must be reframed in order to extend our knowledge and broaden our understanding of contemporary IPE as well as its historical underpinnings and future prospects.

A brief synopsis of issues raised is as follows: first, while the eye of the beholder is recognized as the basis for the definition of beauty, it is seldom in itself the subject of inquiry in political economy. How perspective defines paradigm is seldom

addressed. Even in studies of contending paradigms of political economy, the effects of perspective are not addressed head on. The fact that what one sees depends on how one looks at it (or even who one is) remains among the issues given least attention to date.

Second, reference to “man,” so central to our conventional perspectives, violates the most basic of facts: roughly half of humanity are not “men”; they are most certainly “women.” The role of gender in international politics and political economy has only recently acquired the status of legitimate scholarly inquiry. But we do not yet relate gender matters to questions of states, markets, power, or environment.

Third, conventional approaches to international political economy singularly ignore matters of population, of demographic dislocation, and of mobility across national boundaries. The most frequently cited books on the political economy of international relations make scant, if any, reference to these matters (specifically, “variables”).

Fourth, while the growing appreciation of the role of international institutions remains an important development in the study of international relations and international political economy, how international institutions affect developmental processes is an issue of import that is only now being addressed. Not unconnected are queries into the systemic sources of political and economic activities.

When these queries are raised in the context of human/nature interactions, then a full range of intellectual problems emerge—well beyond the scope of approaches to international political economy as conventionally defined. Fifth, then, is the effort to draw out the implications of the one theory of international relations that explicitly addresses humanity/nature interactions to the emergent challenges associated with global warming.

Therefore, the concluding article of this issue addresses conceptual and empirical underpinnings of the political economy of global environmental change.

None of the problems addressed in this issue will evaporate with the passage of time. None are truly “solvable”; none can be subject to the proverbial “quick-fix.” All challenge the conventional bounds of international political economy. All engage in the effort to press beyond the bounds of what we conventionally regard as the field of international political economy.