

Everyday action in times of economic change: historical lessons for contemporary international trends

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BISA 2024 IPEG panel proposal: Everyday action in times of economic change: historical lessons for contemporary international trends

Sponsor: International Political Economy Working Group

Chair: James A. Morrison (London School of Economics and Political Science)

Everyday perceptions of inequality in periods of international economic turbulence:

Evidence from the British interwar years

Author: Kasper Arabi (University of Warwick)

Forestalling hegemonic decline: Walter Runciman, trade protectionism and Britain's search for systemic openness

Author: Oksana Levkovich (London School of Economics and Political Science)

The "siren song" of Smoot-Hawley: Metaphor and masculinity in US trade policy, 1981-2021

Author: Edward Knudsen (University of Oxford)

The pandemic, 'the economy' and race: how economic histories mobilised American anti-lockdown and Black Lives Matter protesters.

Author: Jessica Eastland-Underwood (University of Warwick)

This panel examines the role of agency in times of political and economic change looking at histories that are both foundational and novel to our disciplinary identities in IPE: from the interwar abandonment of the Gold Standard and free trade by the UK to advancement of protectionism and the response to the pandemic in the USA. The panel's emphasis on agency as a means of understanding of the evolving dynamics of structural changes goes to the heart of 2024 conference's address of the question whose international studies are we teaching, researching, writing, and contributing to. It also reflects on the limits of existing theories and what kind of biases we as researchers bring into our analyses when we use archival records and sources available in real time.

The four papers grapple with the underpinnings of global economic order by examining the role that everyday agents and their ideas play in defining the struggle brought about by economic change. Analysing the economic disintegration of the interwar period and the current fracturing of the liberal international order, the papers address the relationship between economic theory, foreign trade policy and the international monetary system, between inequality and international political economy.

Arabi's paper investigates how developments in the international political economy are interpreted on the everyday level and shape the way everyday actors experience their own position in the (international) economy. Focusing on perceptions of economic inequality among British everyday agents in the interwar years, he shows how the economic turbulence leading up to the Great Depression and the abandonment of the gold standard left important marks on the social cohesion of the British society which would influence British politics in the years that followed. Doing so, he deploys a historicist approach and emphasises the importance of archival evidence when exploring the links between the everyday and the international. While this might be seen as a paradox – because everyday people only rarely find their way to the archival record – Arabi showcases how historical experiences hidden in the archives are key to understanding the importance of non-elite actors and their practices when it comes to international affairs. Actors and practices that otherwise will remain overlooked.

Levkovich's paper analyses the UK's "(Br)exit" from the global economic order in the 1930s. For decades, relative economic decline had created structural incentives for the UK to rethink its approach to trade. But,

contrary to the predictions of structural and materialist theories, the UK continued to support the liberal international trading system that it had fostered in the 19th century. With the onset of the Great Depression - and then the 1931 financial crisis - the call for protection gained real political salience. Even then, however, Levkovych finds, the shift toward protection was deferred, deflected, and diminished. This was due to the concerted efforts of a group of pragmatic liberal free-traders in the National Government led by the President of the Board of Trade Walter Runciman. By analysing structural change as engendering active human agency, she shows how better understanding of the contingency involved in everyday economic policymaking helps us to question and correct analytical assumptions of structural theories that continue to dominate the field of international political economy.

Knudsen contributes to an ever-growing literature on the relationship between masculinity and economic structures in his paper through a study of the language used to legitimise international trade policy. Although the sexualisation of trade may initially appear counter-intuitive, Knudsen demonstrates that political actors in the USA deploy sexual language in their argumentation regarding tariff policy. Using a close reading methodology uncovers the many ways that American presidents across a four-decade period to appeal to the public using gendered language to make trade policy more visceral. Although presidents are undoubtedly elite actors, the act of drafting speeches and choosing metaphors remains a part of 'everyday politics' that can be obscured in technical analyses of trade policy history. Knudsen highlights the way that a lack of reflection on these rhetorical choices can miss how the male experience is often centred in international political economy.

Eastland-Underwood examines the links between everyday political thought, economic ideas and racism in her paper showing how economic histories mobilised protesters in the USA in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic. 'The economy' remains amongst the most prominent political concept in American elections, although Eastland-Underwood questions whether we understand what Americans mean when they say 'the economy' motivates them politically. Although Covid-19 was a health crisis, the political response to the pandemic reveals many assumptions about economic systems both in the USA and globally. In examining Black Lives Matter next to the anti-lockdown protests, she argues that interpretivist methodologies can help shine a light on the many blind spots of international political economy, particularly race. Eastland-Underwood identifies that memories of economic histories are not limited to the elite but also inform everyday political thought, playing a crucial role in the reproduction of white supremacy.

By helping us understand what effect both contemporary and historical motivations of the everyday actors, their ideas and rhetoric can have on the global economic order, these papers create opportunity for a debate that both cuts across traditional lines of epistemological enquiry in IPE and addresses the boundaries of equality, diversity and inclusivity in our discipline.

Track Classification: International Political Economy Working Group