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The relationship between poverty and prosperity: a feminist relational account

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ABSTRACT

In this paper I use a feminist relational approach to critically examine contemporary mainstream assumptions in the field of development concerning the relationship between poverty and prosperity. I show how these assumptions underpin the policies and practices of poverty alleviation within international development institutions. I argue that when prosperity is understood as a condition of independence actualized through processes of maximum extraction, exploitation, and accumulation, the persistence of poverty and continued exploitation of social and ecological systems seems inevitable. This analysis reveals how the processes of defining and measuring poverty and prosperity as discrete conditions, binary opposites on a development spectrum masks the relational nature of poverty and prosperity whereby the pursuit of prosperity in global capitalist systems drives the production of poverty across spaces and places. Further, it ignores the ecological embeddedness and social interdependence of human beings for existence, survival, and well-being. The paper provides insights from a feminist relational perspective on the possibilities of thinking about prosperity beyond extractionism.

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1. Introduction

As the Second World War moved into its final devastating stages, the International Labour Organisation (ILO), through the Philadelphia Declaration (1944), reflected on the fundamental lessons of this dark period in human history. It claimed that ‘poverty anywhere constitutes a danger to prosperity everywhere’ (ILO 1944). Ideas concerning the promotion of prosperity and the alleviation of poverty have informed mainstream international development policy and practice since this time. The commitment to alleviating poverty by promoting prosperity on a global scale is a core feature of the United Nations (UN) Sustainable Development Goals, *Agenda 2030* (UN Sustainable Development Group 2015), and the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change *Paris Agreement* (UNFCCC 2015). Agreed objectives of this global policy architecture are localized and

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operationalized at the state level. Governance and oversight of international development policy and practice is facilitated through the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and UN structures and agencies. The policies and practices of development are operationalized through a complex web of interacting intergovernmental organizations and international financial institutions (IFIs) supported by multiple governmental and non-governmental organizations at international and national scales.

Set by one of the leading IFIs, the World Bank, the international poverty line (IPL) for extreme poverty is measured at the household level in narrow monetized terms. It currently rests at \$1.90 per day for low-income countries, with higher poverty lines set at \$3.20 a day and \$5.50 for middle-income and upper middle-income countries. These are taken to be the lowest income levels below which basic needs including food, shelter, and clothing cannot be met. In 2017, 9.2% of the global population lived below the extreme poverty line, with a further 23% in middle-income countries such as Egypt and India living below \$3.20 a day, and 46.3% in upper middle-income countries such as South Africa and Brazil living below \$5.50 a day (World Bank 2018). At the state level, economic prosperity is measured by gross domestic product (GDP). GDP refers to the 'monetary value of all goods and services produced within a country or region in a specific time period' (Roser 2013, 1). Following decades of global economic growth and expansion, all countries have seen rises in GDP levels. However, the benefits of economic development have been highly uneven with extreme poverty persisting within and between countries (UNDP 2020). The focus on GDP masks deep distributional differentials marked by geography, gender, class, race, and ethnicity.

Since the establishment of the international development institutional architecture, economic growth has emerged as the primary instrument in the reduction and alleviation of poverty. In 2017, the rate of decline of those living in extreme poverty began to stall. According to the UN 2020 *SDG Report*, 6% of the global population are on target to remain below the extreme poverty level by 2030. As communities now navigate the COVID-19 pandemic, the post-pandemic world is likely to witness further increases in extreme poverty levels with an additional 88–115 million people likely to be pushed below this line because of this pandemic (UN Sustainable Development Group 2020). All of this is at a time when over four billion people across the world have little or no access to social protection supports and collective instruments to help them cope with shocks (ILO 2021; Murphy and Walsh 2014).

A fair question to pose is what has gone wrong and why? This paper takes up this challenge and critically examines contemporary mainstream development conceptualisations of poverty and prosperity to understand why efforts to reduce poverty and increase prosperity through the primary instrument of economic growth are failing. In the paper, I draw upon a feminist relational approach to critically interrogate the distributional effects of global economic capitalist structures, the assumptions, norms, and values upon which these structures rest, and the false separatism between economic, social, and ecological systems that these structures sustain. Within these structures, a fictitious hierarchy emerges, with those activities and elements that can be commoditised, monetized, and traded on markets being attributed value and recognition. Fundamental contributions that are necessary to life including social reproductive labour, care, and functioning ecological systems remain hidden, lacking recognition and representation.

I argue that a feminist relational lens reveals and challenges the values and norms that inform understandings of prosperity within economic globalization under capitalism.

When prosperity is understood as a condition of countries and individuals attaining independence and taken to be actualized through processes of maximum extraction, exploitation, and accumulation, the persistence of income poverty and the continued expropriation and exploitation of social reproductive labour and ecological systems is inevitable. This critical lens reveals how mainstream processes of defining and measuring conceptions of poverty and prosperity as discrete conditions, binary opposites on a development spectrum, is problematic. Such conceptions mask the relational nature of poverty and prosperity whereby the pursuit of prosperity within global capitalist systems drives the production of poverty across spaces and places. Further, it ignores the embeddedness and interdependence of economic systems upon functioning ecological systems and human relations of care and social reproduction. Distorted ideals of independence and individualism achieved through extraction and exploitation are necessary ingredients to prosperity in capitalist systems. Yet such fictitious ideals ensure that this system remains crisis prone, unstable, and dependent on extraction and exploitation through domination and control. It is a system that perpetuates and sustains poverty, multidimensional inequalities, and ecological collapse. Thus, I argue it is necessary to move debates concerning poverty alleviation beyond a focus on methods of measurement to critically reflect upon the values and norms that inform understandings of prosperity within economic globalization under capitalism.

The section that follows begins with an examination of the methods of measuring and defining poverty and prosperity within mainstream development accounts and the practical and ethical problems to which these give rise – the problems of feasibility, inequality, and unsustainability. Section 3 explores three theoretical insights that emerge when the focus begins to shift from a single axis framework to a relational one. Section 4 provides some examples by feminist economists and political ecologists of multi-dimensional accounts that advance understandings of the relationality of poverty and the ecological embeddedness of economic systems. I then point to the gaps that remain, ones that require a distinctly feminist relational approach to address. Section 5 explains how feminist relational theory deepens and expands relational thinking beyond a focus on macro structures, to incorporate consideration of implicit assumptions, values, and norms that are refracted through situated social structures and power dynamics and perpetuate issues of power and oppression for identifiable social groups. I then argue that the values and norms that frame the language of poverty, poverty alleviation, and prosperity within international development policies and practices perpetuate forms of neocolonialism, sustain asymmetrical power relations, and amplify intersecting forms of class, race, and gender-based oppression. Section 6 argues that alternative assumptions, values, and norms based on reciprocity, care, and connection rather than extraction, exploitation, and expansion, are necessary to protect the conditions of possibility for flourishing social and ecological systems. The final section 7 reflects on a feminist relational conception of prosperity without extractionism, in a post-COVID context.

2. From poverty to prosperity: mainstream development policies and assumptions

Poverty and prosperity are typically understood as opposite ends of a spectrum. Poverty is defined as *'the condition of having little or no wealth or few material possessions; indigence, destitution'* and prosperity, understood as *'the condition of being prosperous, successful, or*

thriving; good fortune, success, well-being, wealth' (Oxford English Dictionary). The link between these two positions is recognized as both a matter of security, and of justice. Encapsulated in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), that everyone has the 'right to a standard of living adequate for health and well-being' (Article 25), the eradication of poverty has formed a central concern for national and international development cooperation since the establishment of the UN.

One of the most influential theories informing mainstream development policy and practice is modernization theory (Lerner 1958). Modernization is understood as a wider social process in the movement of countries from the status of traditional to modern, 'of which development is the economic component' (Lerner 1967, 21). Deeply influenced by Western capitalist development histories and norms, this account takes poverty and prosperity to sit at opposite ends of a spectrum, with a pathway from one to the other as an incremental series of steps on a ladder (Sachs 2005), marked by the attainment of material and physical needs. Underlying theories of change assume a linear relationship; that economic activity and growth will push individual workers and countries on a journey from poverty towards prosperity. Economic growth is the identified solution.

The idea of modernization is further premised upon an assumption that there is a relationship between economic prosperity and changing social norms and values (Sachs 2015). Higher income levels and rising GDP levels correlate with various forms of social progress such as gender equality, racial equality, respect for human rights, and commitment to democratic values (Sachs 2015). On some accounts, such as capability approaches, enhancing 'human capital' through increasing access to education and health care not only leads to healthier, better educated workers, which are necessary to increase GDP levels, but also better health outcomes and life expectancy rates. However, the direction of the relationship between economic development and social progress is highly contested, with feminist economists such as Naila Kabeer finding that 'macroeconomic studies generally find fairly robust evidence that gender equality has a positive impact on economic growth, but reverse findings relating to the impact of economic growth on gender equality are far less consistent' (2016, 295). Similar contestations are evident in the work of David Pellow on the relationship between economic growth, race, and environmental destruction, and his examination of Black Lives Matter as an environmental justice challenge (2016). Further, the relationship between economic development and climate change has emerged as a concern for development policy and practice, as rising GDP levels directly correlate with rising Greenhouse Gases (GHGs) and environmental destruction. Empirical evidence now points to at least three key practical problems with this global capitalist development paradigm – the problems of feasibility, inequality, and unsustainability.

2.1. The feasibility problem

Even with steady growth rates and narrow methods of measuring progress, the goal of alleviating income poverty has not been achieved. As noted by the World Bank's Kaushik Basu, 'if all countries grow at the rates they achieved during the first decade of this century and income distribution remains unchanged, then in 2030 seventeen countries will have more than 30% of their people living in poverty' (2013, 6–7). 2017 witnessed the stalling of income poverty rates, and 2020 has witnessed an increase in the

number of people living below the IPL for the first time in over 30 years (UNDP 2020; World Bank 2020). When placed in the global context, the current model is not achievable, nor is it feasible.

The narrowness of the measurement and the focus on economic growth through the IPL and GDP have failed to monitor and measure the emergence of problems within the underlying ecological systems and social institutions that support economic activity. Such mainstream economic measures focus on income and market-based activities and leave completely hidden and unrecognized the non-market-based contributions, and indicators of their decline. Economic growth and expansion give rise to increasing levels of environmental degradation and biodiversity loss, increasing GHGs directly feeding systems of global warming that threaten catastrophic climate change and species extinction (IPCC 2018), increasing income inequality, and social inequality (UNDP 2019, 2020). Further, there is strong evidence of a breakdown of trust in political systems and of social solidarity in some of the highest income countries, marked by an ever-expanding gap between those who benefit from the current global political economy, and those carrying the burdens of this economic system (Fraser and Jaeggi 2018; Harvey 2018; OECD 2021; Piketty 2020).

The lived experience of much of the global population in 2022 is marked by declining ecosystems, rising levels of damage and harm as a consequence of changing climates, increasing levels of poverty, increasing inequality, increasing health challenges, persistent endemic discrimination based on gender, race, religion, class, and caste, and grinding poverty and hunger (UNDP 2020). Such is the growing frustration with these narrow, reductionist measurements, that some from within the global institutional architecture are questioning the dominant economic paradigm. For example, in his final report as UN Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights, Philip Alston calls for 'radical rethinking of existing approaches to poverty eradication' (Alston 2020, 3).

2.2. The problem of income inequality and intersecting inequalities

As economies have continued to grow, income inequality has also deepened (Piketty 2020). The current global capitalist system continues to leave more than 50% of the population living below \$5.50 per day (Lawson et al. 2019) with 21% of the working population classified as either moderately poor or poor. The situation is worst in low-income natural-resource rich countries where 33% of the workforce are classified as extremely poor and 22% as moderately poor (ILO 2019).

However, income inequality marks only one form of inequality. Other forms of inequality and how these interact and intersect are also relevant to identifying the profiles and circumstances of those most likely to experience poverty in different forms, including economic, social, and political exclusion and marginalization. First conceptualized by Kabeer in 2010, empirical examinations of 'intersecting inequalities' in the *World Social Science Report 2016* identified seven critical areas of inequality that interact and intersect to exclude, marginalize, and amplify experiences of poverty for the most vulnerable populations. These include economic, political, social, spatial, knowledge-based, cultural, and environmental dimensions (UNESCO 2016).

The persistence of high levels of income inequality and deepening understandings of intersecting inequalities have prompted some of the chief architects of the global economic order to reflect on the distributional effects of the development paradigm. For

example, the OECD, has proposed that the economic principle of ‘maximum efficiency’ should be tempered towards a principle of ‘inclusive’ growth. According to Gabriela Ramos, OECD Chief of Staff,

inclusive growth means not only that the benefits of economic growth are widely shared, but that the growth process itself is built with the participation of all, particularly low-income groups and laggard firms. We need a growth model that introduces equity considerations ex ante and that puts people at the heart of policymaking. (OECD 2018, 2)

Although a shift in focus to ideas of ‘inclusive’ growth is important, it is deeply questionable that this would be sufficient to address the structural drivers of poverty in all its dimensions. It continues to fail to take into account non-market based productive inputs and activities including care and social reproduction, and ecological systems within which all economic activities are based and upon which all human activity depends. Social reproductive labour, care, and ecological systems are background conditions of capitalist economies and facilitate growth through the provision of non-commoditised (non-monetized) essential enablers. According to Nancy Fraser, ‘Capitalism’s economy ... stands in a relation of denial vis-à-vis its background conditions. It disavows its dependence on them by treating nature, social reproduction, and public power as “free gifts,” ... [that] can be appropriated ad infinitum without any concern for replenishment’ (Fraser and Jaeggi 2018, 72). The relationship between current economies and social and ecological systems is extractive, exploitative, unstable, and crisis prone. Thus, even inclusive growth accounts that fail to consider these fundamental interdependencies are ill-equipped to eradicate global poverty.

2.3. The problem of unsustainability

From an ecological perspective, the challenge of climate change calls into question the practical possibility of ‘inclusive growth’. As Fankhauser and Stern argue, ‘economists were slow to recognize the enormity of climate change and its relevance to economic development’, and of those who have engaged with this challenge,

they have focused on fairly marginal perturbations to long-term growth when the question at hand is the management of immense risk and the longer term. Growth itself could be severely disrupted and reversed and not simply perturbed on the margin. (2016, 10)

If growth is the handmaiden to poverty alleviation, and growth itself is at risk, alternative forms of poverty alleviation may need to be considered, and alternative understandings of prosperity that are not premised on growth are required.

As pointed out in capability theory approaches (for example Cosgrove and Curtis 2021) and in the annual *Human Development Reports*, development outcomes over the past few decades indicate the expansion of human development indicators in terms of health, education, and life expectancy, albeit persistently and unevenly distributed. When ecological factors are considered, the risks of the current economic order based on continued resource extraction, maximum exploitation of nature, and continuous growth in production and consumption levels beyond the earth’s carrying capacities, mean that ecological collapse and the climate crisis clearly threaten recent development gains. That we know this to be the case, and yet continue to focus on economic growth as the primary instrument to alleviate poverty, is deeply ethically problematic.

Overall, the problems of feasibility, rising inequalities, and unsustainability indicate that traditional assumptions informing development are misguided. At a fundamental level, they give rise to pressing moral questions. Why continue to support structures and systems that fail to achieve their core objective of alleviating poverty and more troublingly, perpetuate and accentuate multiple forms of avoidable harm? How should the relationship between prosperity and poverty be understood? What conceptions of prosperity are compatible with the alleviation of poverty in all forms? Addressing these moral and political questions is fundamental to the task of determining appropriate policies and structures.

3. Some challenges to single axis accounts

At least three important theoretical insights emerge from this critical review. Firstly, framings of poverty and economic development as purely technical matters, abstracted from situated ecological and social inputs and enablers are deeply inadequate. The need to move from siloed, narrow, single-axis analysis to analytical frameworks that can model the interactions, interdependencies, and connections among contextually situated economic, ecological, and social structures and relations are now emerging. The work of Sachs (2020), for example, has moved away from assumptions of continuous progress to a relational examination of factors such as geography, technology, and institutions as essential for determining appropriate economic pathways from poverty to prosperity. Another example is from the economic geographer David Harvey, who challenges the assumption that poverty and prosperity are distinct and binary opposites and argues that this assumption fails to recognize the relationship between the pursuit of prosperity within globalized economic systems, and the perpetuation of poverty through this pursuit. For Harvey, the challenge is not to discover the ingredients necessary to explain how countries and communities can move up the development ladder, but to explain how the relationship between dominant economic conceptualisations of prosperity and poverty are connected as two sides of the same coin (Harvey 2011, 2018). Through the treatment of poverty and prosperity as discrete conditions at opposite ends of a spectrum, classical economic development approaches mask a fundamental political problem whereby the pursuit of prosperity, achieved through global systems of extraction and accumulation, increases the bundle of goods for some people in some places and spaces, but shapes and drives material poverty in others (Hickel 2017).

Secondly, accounts of development that prioritize economic development over ecological and social well-being are not only misleading, but dangerous. In her critique of economic globalization under capitalism, Fraser explains how capitalist systems rely upon a variety of non-material domains that cross geographic contexts and give rise to uneven and unequal distributional, representational, and recognitional effects. Fraser's account examines what she refers to as the background conditions of possibility necessary for capitalist accumulation (2013). These include multi-scalar governance and institutional structures and functions; the continued availability of nature to act as a source for productive inputs and sinks for productive waste; and care and affective labour (Fraser 2013, 101). Harvey offers an expanded range of relational dimensions that require consideration in reflections on international development including diverse and competing worldviews; social and class relations; daily life and social reproduction

(Harvey 2011, 19). These dimensions overlap and interact with one another and with the systems of technological and organizational innovation, production, exchange, and consumption. They are relationally bound to one another such that a shift in one sphere can drive changes in others. Thus, the dominant development paradigm that focuses on economic growth without considering its relationship to social and ecological domains risks undermining the conditions of its own possibility. As Fraser argues, 'like a tiger that bites its own tail, neoliberalism threatens ... to erode the very supports on which capitalism depends' (2013, 115). The pursuit of prosperity that depends upon the continued extraction and exploitation of 'free' natural resources and systems of care and social reproduction without recognizing this dependence and interdependence are fundamentally oppressive and poverty perpetuating for some.

Thirdly, these findings point to methodological challenges of traditional measurements that rest on positivist assumptions and ideals of objectivity, impartiality, and narrow single-axis analysis. In so doing, they fail to account for the effects of the centrality of relationships to the internalization of norms, values, and expectations that influence and inform daily life, worldviews, and social relations. Feminist epistemologist and relational theorist Lorraine Code has argued extensively that such approaches are deeply problematic, rooted in ethno-centric and deeply masculinized understandings of social research (Code 2008, 2020). Classical economic approaches ignore the influence of constructed and situated social norms and cultural traditions, and of relations of gender, class, and race at different levels and in different contexts. Such conceptualisations of the poverty-prosperity nexus leave hidden and unchallenged social and ecological dynamics that enable and sustain this organizational form, and that shape the patterns of distribution and recognition that emerge. A distinctly feminist relational lens is necessary to evaluate these dynamics and to reveal the distributional and recognitional effects when capitalist economic norms interact with and are refracted through situated cultural traditions and embedded social relationships.

Many feminist theorists, economists, and geographers have argued for decades that systems of measuring the IPL and GDP are distinctly masculinized, leaving hidden gendered experiences and drivers of poverty and the gendered effects of poverty alleviation projects (Bradshaw, Chant, and Linneker 2019; Chant 2020). The IPL, for example, ignores the relevance of intra-household dynamics, care, and social reproduction (Kabeer 2016; Murphy 2015). Through the examination of a masculinized, individualized, and disembodied unit of analysis, these scholars have argued that development practices that focus exclusively on formal employment and income, ignoring non-market-based inputs and contributions, sustain systems of injustice and inequality (Bradshaw, Chant, and Linneker 2017, 2019). By focusing exclusively on economic growth, underlying social systems and relations are assumed to be natural and fixed and thereby remain unchanged. Gender regimes based on a gendered division of labour, gender pay-gaps, asymmetrical power relations, continued exploitation, and undervaluing of those engaged in care and social reproduction persist. Unsustainable relations to nature based on maximum extraction, maximum exploitation, and complete domination of all resources continues unquestioned. Measuring success and prosperity levels through narrow economic indicators presumes the continued extraction and exploitation of human resources and natural resources—the 16.4 billion unpaid care hours per annum (Coffey and Oxfam 2020) and the rapid depletion of natural resources and declining ecosystems and biodiversity (IPBES 2019).

4. Multidimensional indices and ecological accounts: steps to relationality?

In recognition of the limitations of the narrow measurements of poverty and prosperity through a concentration on the IPL and GDP, feminist and progressive economists and theorists have also developed alternative indices to better capture the multi-dimensional and relational character of poverty. The multidimensional poverty index (MPI) measures outcomes across three dimensions, with ten indicators examining health, education, and standard of living. This approach highlights how deficiencies across different indicators overlap and interact to deepen the intensity of poverty and to reinforce the exclusion of affected populations from the possibilities of flourishing and well-being. The 2019 MPI report found 1.3 billion people across 101 countries (23.1%) are multi-dimensionally poor (UNDP 2019). Frances Stewart's work on horizontal inequalities has been particularly instructive in explaining the distributional effects on socially defined groups and categories (2005). When refracted through situated, socially constructed gender dynamics and power systems, intersecting and overlapping forms of poverty point to differentially distributed levels of intensity of poverty, marginalization, and exclusion (Kabeer 2015).

Natural scientists and ecologists have also sought to broaden measurements beyond the classical economics paradigm to give recognition to the contributions of nature to human development. The emergence of concepts such 'natural capital' and 'ecosystem services' (Gómez-Baggethun et al. 2010), use economic language in an effort to quantify the value of nature. No longer hidden, through this approach the benefits that natural environments, biodiversity, and ecosystems provide to human beings can be quantified and the true economic costs can be counted. This approach has proved to be a powerful analytical device to explain the economic value to policy makers and business leaders. However, in appealing to the classical capitalist lens of commodification, isolation, and atomization of entities, such an approach fails to recognize the intrinsic value of nature and of elements that cannot be commoditized, atomized, and traded in open markets. Ecosystem services are not in any true sense of the word 'services' - they are essential factors for producing and sustaining life and well-being.

For Fraser, and for earlier political economists such as Karl Polanyi, natural and functioning ecosystems are the 'conditions of possibility' without which there is no economy. Referencing Polanyi, Fraser notes that attempts to commodify systems of land, nature, and labour result in systemic crises over time and space (Fraser 2013, 119). Such practices of 'fictitious commodification' are inherently incoherent and incompatible with sustainable social cooperation and functioning ecosystems. Although intended as helpful intellectual constructs that are comprehensible within dominant modes of thinking, the commodification of natural systems into capital and services does not address the underlying distributional, representational, and recognitional inequalities upon which contemporary capitalist systems rest. When refracted through existing social and spatial relations, this approach risks perpetuating rather than alleviating poverty in all its variations, and it risks further destabilization of ecological systems through climate change.

Recognizing that traditional models of economic growth, achieved through extraction and maximum exploitation of ecological systems and of human relations of care and social reproduction, are problematic, it is possible to identify at least two other possible

pathways within the science-policy debates – the eco-modernist approach and the eco-solidarist approach.

The eco-modernist approach is a modified version of the extractionist model which entails continued steady growth, but with a focus on the greening of development over time through technological advancements, and some improvements in systems of distribution; in particular, through the establishment of more robust social protection systems at national levels (see, for example, the SDG framework and the European Commission's European Green Deal, 2019). Within the UN SDGs it is argued that development needs to be 'greener'. As Baskin (2019) notes, *delinking* growth and development from their negative environmental impacts, rather than *rethinking* development is the predominant imaginary informing eco-modernism and the sustainable development paradigm. But if it is the same system that coproduced the devastating natural effects of persistent poverty, inequality, and social disruption that we are now experiencing, then why would we think that continued dependence on this system, albeit greener and somewhat reformed, would lead to better outcomes? Indeed, the IPCC (2018) estimates that actions taken to keep global warming to 1.5°C will drive an additional 100 million people into poverty by 2030 using current definitions and measurements. It is important to note that this number is likely to be significantly higher should global warming exceed 1.5°C. Thus, for many, the eco-modernist approach may not be sufficient to avoid catastrophic climate change. Further, it will not achieve SDG 1 to 'end poverty is all its forms everywhere' (UN Agenda 2030, 2015).

Eco-solidarists, on the other hand, seek to blend natural and social world concerns and realities. This approach would require the radical reshaping of contemporary practices of production and consumption (Escobar 2015). Essentially, it aims to decouple understandings of prosperity from economic growth (Jackson 2017, 2021). Hayward and Iwaki (2016) argue that the present global economic system is making the poor worse off in terms of ecological space and access to the productive capacities (energy and matter) of this space, which are essentially necessary for human life and well-being. They also argue in favour of the need to rethink development.

However, a form of what Fraser refers to as 'critical separatism' (Fraser 2013, 101) seems to inform these debates. Although recognizing the instrumental and intrinsic value of nature to economic and human systems, they too leave hidden the multiple interacting, overlapping, and relational spheres that influence daily life and lived experiences. Recognizing the imperative to move beyond an extractionist worldview in relations to nature without also reflecting upon the extractive nature of social relations of care is deeply problematic within these accounts. Internalized patriarchal beliefs and values that underpin contemporary gender norms and regimes across public and private institutions and the continued free provision of the necessary activities of care and social reproduction remain hidden and un-recognized. Both accounts fail to give sufficient recognition to the plurality of elements that influence lived experiences, that explain who is likely to experience poverty, and what forms of poverty this experience may entail.

Further, from the perspective of social and gender justice, neither the eco-solidarist or the eco-modernist approaches pay sufficient attention to how this transformation should be done, how the benefits and burdens should be distributed, and who and what should be protected. These are essential political and ethical debates marked by deep contestation. Shifting from prioritizing economic development to prioritizing ecological systems

and environmental protection does not give sufficient attention to the social systems and relations of power within which these are embedded. It leaves completely hidden the extractionism of embedded social relations and gender regimes.

The accounts examined in this section are critically important to deepening understandings of the multidimensional nature of poverty and inequality, and broadening measurements beyond the IPL and GDP to give some recognition to the contributions of social and ecological systems. However, they fall short of sufficiently questioning the power dynamics sustaining social cooperation, or of extending their gaze to question how the conception of prosperity underpinning capitalist systems entails the impoverishment of identifiable groups and spaces through the expropriation of their labour and resources. A feminist relational lens facilitates an examination of these questions and reveals alternative understandings of prosperity without extractionism.

5. Feminist relational theory: expanding relational accounts

A powerful insight in a relational understanding of poverty and prosperity is that these concepts are connected, rather than discrete binary opposites. This insight builds upon relational understandings of poverty in development theory (Mosse 2010), political economy (Harvey 2018; Hickel 2017; Kabeer 2016), political ecology (Jackson 2021; Mies and Shiva 1993), and feminist relational theory (Koggel 2002, 2020). Although not specifically focused on the international development space, Fraser's feminist political economy analysis is particularly useful for unpacking the linkages between social, ecological, and economic systems that influence the relationship between poverty and prosperity and the meta-narratives that sustain contemporary capitalist systems and masculinized ideals of prosperity (2018).

By building on these structural and systems levels accounts, a specifically feminist relational lens requires the examination of underlying and implicit assumptions, values, and norms that frame the language of poverty, poverty alleviation, and prosperity within international development policies and practices. As Sherwin and Stockdale note, feminist relational theory is a broad umbrella term that is used to describe 'any approach to ethical questions explicitly attentive to the relational nature of selves' (2017, 6). Feminist relational approaches require situation-sensitive analysis to explore how norms and values interact with embedded social and cultural systems and beliefs. Prompted by the work of Christine Koggel, a feminist relational approach is used here to 'uncover the governing norms and practices ... that sustain inequalities of various sorts' (Koggel 2002, 249). As noted by Koggel, feminist relational approaches intentionally bring 'issues of power and oppression to the forefront *and* they show how these are embedded in and assumed by norms reflected in structures, institutions, laws, practices, and so on' (Koggel 2020, 52, emphasis added). Following this logic, an analysis of prosperity within globalized capitalist economies that depends upon the continued extraction and exploitation of 'free' natural resources and systems of care and social reproduction without recognizing this dependence are fundamentally oppressive.

The application of a feminist relational lens reveals two distinct ways in which economic accounts misrepresent the relationship between poverty and prosperity. Firstly, an exploration of the governing norms and values points to a range of specifiable, traditionally masculine norms and values. Deeply influenced by Western capitalist development

histories and values, prosperity is framed as a condition of independence, actualized through processes of extractionism and maximum control over ecological and social resources. Poverty is taken to be the opposite, a condition of dependence and powerlessness. The methods to achieve this status of independence are based on core capitalist principles of extraction and domination of resources, both human and ecological. These are the features of the dominant ethos in which relationships are embedded, which influence lived experiences, and which influence the multi-directional dynamic nature of the relationship between poverty and prosperity that is produced by and embedded within this order. Mainstream economic understandings of poverty and prosperity fail to recognize the unavoidable embeddedness of human beings in social and ecological systems, the interdependence between human beings for their existence and survival, and the connections with ecological systems. Secondly, it fails to recognize the ways in which the pursuit of prosperity in some places and spaces implicitly depends upon the exploitation of others in other places, thus driving the persistence of poverty. Within globalized capitalist economies, poverty and prosperity interact as two sides of the same coin. These insights suggest that traditional Western and masculinized ideals of prosperity must shift if sustainable solutions to extreme poverty are to be found. Drawing these strands together, the following section argues that the feminist values of reciprocity, care, connection, and interdependence rather than extractionism, exploitation, and maximum accumulation and control are necessary to protect the conditions of possibility for flourishing social and ecological systems.

6. Norms and values: disrupting contemporary capitalist thinking

To unpack my argument, it is necessary to examine the core assumptions underpinning this model – extractionism and disconnectedness. Ecofeminist theorists Mies and Shiva (1993) have argued that the value of extractionism that underpins contemporary capitalist systems is rooted in Western ideals of masculinity that necessitate the domination, subjugation, and oppression of women and nature. Through their biological capacities for reproduction and their socially ascribed role as caregivers, women's bodies and care-capacities are used, without recognition or appreciation, to support continued economic activity and accumulation. Ecological systems as well as reproductive capacities are taken to be 'natural' and exploited for all that they can give. As non-market based productive areas, they are not ascribed specific economic value and therefore, not measured or acknowledged in the production processes. Distorted ideals of independence and excessive individualism generate a fictitious hierarchy of contribution with those activities and elements that can be commoditised, monetized, and traded in markets being attributed value and recognition. Fundamental contributions that are necessary to life including social reproduction and functioning ecological systems remain hidden, lacking recognition and representation. Poverty is an unavoidable outcome of economic systems premised on such fictitious ideals.

The second assumption that underpins the contemporary development model is disconnectedness or the false dichotomy between human and natural systems. That economic interests can be separated from and prioritized above the social and ecological systems in which it is embedded and upon which it depends is both epistemically and ontologically problematic. Economic growth within capitalist systems depends upon

certain forms of social cooperation and organization, as well as functioning ecological systems. But social relations and ecological systems do not depend on continued economic growth.

Assumptions of extractionism and disconnectedness fail to capture the empirical reality and ethical implications of understanding human lives as essentially embedded in and dependent upon other human life, care, social reproduction, and functioning ecological systems for our very survival. However, disrupting internalized norms and values is challenging. It may not be sufficient to point to the incoherence of these values or their incompatibility with the pursuit of prosperity through extractionism. It requires reflection on a set of feasible future possibilities that rest within the existing dominant ethos and social imaginary. As Harvey notes, 'change arises out of an existing state of affairs and it has to harness the possibilities immanent within an existing situation' (2011, 229). It is precisely in this area that a feminist relational lens exposes the weaknesses and deficiencies of approaches that remain cognitively locked in traditional masculinized values. The following reflection on feminist relational values offers promising insights.

7. Insights from feminist relational theory: prosperity without extractionism

When poverty is conceived of and treated as a discrete technical concept, there is limited space for questioning the embedded norms which drive deprivation for some, in the pursuit of material prosperity for others. Locations, histories, and socio-environmental conditions directly influence lived experiences of poverty and the possibilities of prosperity. From the moment of birth and the assignation of social identities, specific functions, roles, and values are accorded to each human being. The nature of relationships, self-understandings, and expectations are set within these pre-existing socially embedded structures. To understand the influence of these structures, a feminist relational approach to exploring the dynamic relationship between poverty and prosperity must be attentive to the interacting and overlapping spheres within which human relationships are embedded, and the underlying governing norms and values which sustain these systems. This approach reveals the way in which the relationship between poverty and prosperity is looped within capitalist systems, with feedbacks going in both directions – whereby some prosper at the expense of the impoverishment of others. Further, it reveals the fallacy of economic development policies that treat economic systems as distinct and separate from social and ecological systems. It reveals the ways in which economies are embedded within and dependent upon, rather than separate from, functioning ecological systems and human relations of care and social reproduction and in turn highlights the ways in which they structure and influence those very relations. Feminist relational methodologies seek to expose and explore these interdependencies and are well positioned to explain why identifiable populations experience discrimination, exploitation, and persistent income poverty because of gender, race, and class (Chant 2020), and how they determine one's role in the institutionalized social order of capitalism (Fraser and Jaeggi 2018).

Within the dominant system, masculinized values and norms associated with the assertion of independence and demonstrations of control and domination are celebrated and rewarded. Maximum accumulation of material assets through extraction and exploitation provides the basis for non-material symbols of social status, recognition, and power. It is

the celebration and reward of these characteristics that require challenge if understandings of prosperity are to be compatible with the alleviation of poverty and with the recognition that well-being is a condition to which all human beings have a legitimate claim.

Adopting a feminist relational approach to examine the relationship between poverty and prosperity and the values that underpin social cooperation in the global political-economic order offer important insights into the limitations of contemporary conceptualisations and the possibilities presented by moving past such reductionist frames. Recognition and acceptance of the unavoidable connections and dependencies of economic systems directly challenges assumptions underpinning norms which sustain ideals of prosperity as independence through extractionism. No human being can be completely independent. This suggests that ways of understanding, valuing, and celebrating interdependence, care, and connection are necessary. Rather than leaving hidden the importance of care and social reproduction to the well-being of each and every person, an idea of prosperity that recognizes, respects, and celebrates these human features, above the pursuit of economic gain, would require very different assumptions. Rather than seeking to extract all value and use from human and ecological systems, an idea of reciprocity that recognizes the need to give, as well as take, to ensure that relations and resources can be replenished, and sustained overtime is essential.

At the time of writing, the global economic system has been severely disrupted due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and discussions on how to restart economies in a post pandemic era abound. As the largest economies in the world came to a standstill, the vulnerability of many sections of the population has come into sharp focus—in particular, in countries marked by deep, pre-existing inequalities, uneven social protection systems, and weak health systems. Notions of value in work have been temporarily turned on their head as care work and public health services emerge as the most essential sectors. In the private sector those involved in the lowest paid positions from cleaners to porters to healthcare workers to agricultural labourers and food producers, positions widely filled by women, migrant, and working-class populations, have emerged as the most valuable activities. These activities generate the conditions of possibility for all other economic activity. Thus, this crisis presents an unprecedented opportunity to reflect on the theories, values, and norms that have dominated the global political economy and development discourse over the decades and to consider a relational, restorative approach to reflect not only on what change is necessary, but how this change can be achieved (Llewellyn and Llewellyn 2020)

The COVID-19 crisis has also highlighted the problem of narrow, single-axis analysis as a basis for informing public policy. Designing public policy based on virus transmission rates alone left completely hidden the unintended effects of these policies as they were refracted through pre-existing social structures and norms. Mortality rates seem to be higher amongst males, yet females are more likely to experience harmful indirect effects of the lockdowns and public health measures evidenced through increases in reported cases of gender-based violence; increased caring responsibilities including home-schooling; and the limitations of technology infrastructure. Race and class also emerged as forms of intersecting inequalities that increased exposure and mortality risks. Thus, feminist relational approaches that examine effects across interacting systems and structures are essential to understanding the drivers of risk, vulnerability,

mortality, and the identification of appropriate policies that alleviate, rather than accentuate the possibilities of harmful outcomes – direct and indirect. Robinson’s feminist care ethics approach to theorizing justice in a post-COVID context moves from the basis of embedded lived experiences and everyday practices to reveal a range of enduring hierarchies at multiple scales that perpetuate and sustain systems of global injustice (Robinson 2021).

Experiences through the pandemic also point to the limitations of ideals of independence and extractionism and the possibilities presented by embracing and valuing norms of reciprocity, care, and connection. Countries’ responses to the pandemic were constructed as a classical separatist narrative of economic versus public health. Policy responses at national levels intentionally brought economic systems to a shuddering halt, suspending production and curtailing consumption, as the focus shifted to care work required to bring the virus under control and to minimize loss of human life. It has prompted moments of reflection and recognition – there can be no economy without a healthy society, and no society without healthy ecosystems. Further, the virus itself cannot be contained or eradicated without collective efforts and recognition of the interdependence of human lives and livelihoods. Protection for individuals, communities, and countries can only be achieved by invoking not only self, but other-regarding values. During this time, care and care work has emerged as the most essential activity to protecting life and to creating the conditions of possibility for all other domains. Recognition of the value of the contribution of care and care-work to the public good is evident in public and popular discourses, through social and traditional print media. If and how this might influence socially embedded norms and values is yet to be determined. However, this global event marks a moment of opportunity to move beyond the celebration of narrow, self-interested value systems, towards values of reciprocity, care, connection.

8. Conclusion

This paper critically examined contemporary mainstream development accounts of poverty and prosperity. Drawing on a feminist relational approach to unpack the underlying norms and values that sustain poverty in its varied dimensions, I began with an examination of dominant mainstream conceptualisations of poverty and prosperity that underpin the policies and practices of poverty alleviation within international development institutions. I explain how and why the dominant methods of defining and measuring the concepts of poverty and prosperity as discrete conditions, binary opposites on a development spectrum are problematic. I argue that these methods mask the relational nature of poverty and prosperity whereby the pursuit of prosperity drives the production of poverty across spaces and places.

However, it is not only methods of measurement that are of concern. Through conceptual clarification and the unpacking of implicit assumptions, specifiable, masculinized characterizations of prosperity emerge as particularly problematic. When prosperity is understood as a condition of independence achieved and actualized through processes of maximum extractionism and accumulation, the persistence of poverty and continued exploitation of social and ecological systems seems inevitable. I argue that the norms and values of reciprocity, care, and connection rather than extractionism and accumulation,

are necessary to protect the conditions of possibility for flourishing social and ecological systems, and for the eradication of extreme poverty and multidimensional inequalities.

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