

SPERI research group: Global Disorder

It is something of a truism that we are living in turbulent times. The history of the global system has been periodised as consisting of relatively stable international orders led by hegemonic powers, punctuated by periods of unrest, upheaval and transition. The British Imperial period was followed by a US-led global economy locked in stable tension with the USSR, and later the market-driven logics of neoliberal globalisation. Struggle and conflict is intrinsic to these periods of stability – struggles for liberation from empire, for self-determination and development, and for corporate accountability – but the current moment sees an unusually drawn-out period of ubiquitous global disorder.

Geopolitical tensions are rising as the old global order has broken down, with no clear alternative systemic organisation to replace it. The rise of East Asian economies and rising protectionism trouble the Western neoliberal paradigm. China's Belt and Road initiative is reshaping patterns of development and dependency across the Global South. Russia's war in Ukraine and Israel's bombardment of Palestine disrupt established geopolitical settlements in Europe, the Middle East and beyond.

Global inequality is rising along multiple axes. Wealth is becoming increasingly concentrated in the financial sector, drawing resources away from the real and productive economy, and contributing to wider systemic risk and crisis. Insufficient state spending on social welfare, combined with wage stagnation and labour precarisation are generating a crisis of social reproduction in many parts of the world. This plays out in the realms of food, housing, credit and in the workplace. Growth is stagnating, and related discontent is manifesting in populist movements that disrupt the conventional left-right spectrum and diverge from liberal democracy. This brings new levels of unpredictability into domestic politics which is scaled up to the international system that may have implications for wider trade regimes.

Production is becoming increasingly complex and globalised, with global supply chains spanning continents to connect consumer cultures with exploited labour. Yet, growing patterns of South-South trade and supply chain disruptions laid bare during the COVID19 pandemic cast doubt on the sustainability of the dominant supply chain organisation. Much production/consumption organised via supply chains relies on the fossil economy, whose extraction and exploitation is in turn hurtling us toward climate breakdown, and underpins many contemporary conflicts. Meanwhile, production, consumption, infrastructure and development relentlessly contribute to deforestation, pollution, biodiversity collapse and other forms of ecological degradation that threaten the very basis upon which our economy and society is founded.

The global system is in a state of transformation and flux. Crises of many stripes coalesce, and yet no clear viable path presents itself to transform them. Is the current world-historical conjuncture best characterised as “disorderly”? What, exactly, has been disordered and on whose terms? Are the many different sites of struggle and instability a cause or a symptom of this apparent disorder? How can we make sense of these disparate yet interconnected

phenomena? Who is materially disadvantaged by these shifts, and who is able to extract gains? How are these gains and losses distributed unevenly along racialised, gendered, classed and geographic lines? Where do we see hope for a more equitable, sustainable and stable economic future? And, finally, how can we contribute to these debates, and what role for the academy in seeking progressive solutions and transformation?

This new research grouping aims to provide a space of community for colleagues seeking to understand the most pressing global issues of the 21st century, and how to make sense of global (dis)order in light of them. The substantive focus of the group may be highly varied; they may include research on production and consumption, war and violence, the environment and climate breakdown, social reproduction and labour, migration and bordering, financialisation and debt, inequality and welfare. This may require a focus on the state and its apparatus, the private sector and its governance, as well as civil society, labour and resistance movements. What unites these areas of research is the connection of these actors and phenomena to wider processes of order, disorder, crisis and disruption within the global economy, and a forward-looking concern that seeks to understand the potential for reform and transformation on a global scale. We are keen to pursue discussions around the current nature of global (dis)order with colleagues from a range of disciplinary backgrounds.

The group will not have a formal membership structure, but will be driven by the needs and interests of colleagues within SPERI, the Department of Politics & IR, the wider School and Faculty. Some activities may include:

- Fostering intellectual exchange and/or interdisciplinary collaboration between researchers interested in the politics of the global economy and/or global disorder
- Cultivating debate and discussion about the nature of global (dis)order
- Supporting postdoctoral applications and other potential collaborative grant applications with relevance to global political economy
- Organising future workshops, such as those geared towards a special issue, conference panel or other research collaboration centered around Disorder (2025-6)
- Blog series
- Reading group