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## A Caribbean perspective on China–Caribbean relations: global IR, dependency and the postcolonial condition

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### ABSTRACT

The field of global international relations remains to a great extent aspirational and focussed on the critique of Western-centric perspectives or the appraisal of non-Western theories within their specific geographical and historical contexts. In this essay, we go a step further and transpose a set of Caribbean-based theories that gained prominence in the 1960s and 1970s to apply it to the study of China's contemporary relations with the Caribbean Community, drawing broader implications for China's Belt and Road Initiative. The Caribbean's tradition of critical and radical thought raises important questions about continuing epistemic dependency, structural impediments to development in small and highly open states, and a number of unresolved issues relating to the postcolonial condition in former plantation societies. Drawing upon these insights, we contend that the expectations placed on the emerging 'South–South' link with China are easily overstated, given China's elitist business-centric approach to development, the eschewing of participatory approaches in Sino–Caribbean ventures and the passive incorporation of the Caribbean into China's global vision.

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## Introduction

What does it take for a field of studies to become 'global'? The term is flexibly applied across disciplines, injecting research agendas with a veneer of timeliness yet often referring to a variety of things. One meaning has to do with the *politics of knowledge creation*, or who speaks. After decades of postcolonial critique, there exist today many disciplinary efforts to, more or less genuinely, 'provincialise' Western scholarship and recognise a diversity of voices and experiences from the South (Chakrabarty 1992). Disciplines such as anthropology and postcolonial literary theory pioneered this endeavour, taking into careful consideration non-Western canons and knowledges – although in the case of the first this interest was initially underpinned by Western imperialism and 'scientific racism'. Anthropologists have more recently advanced important debates on positionality and critical reflectivity (Mullings 2005), and increasingly turned the ethnographic lens towards multi-sited processes, transnational flows, and the interests and behaviours of powerful actors (Gilberthorpe and Rajak

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2017). This has helped to unsettle the traditional hierarchy between the North as a site of knowledge production and the South as the 'field' of investigation. Even more recently, the agenda to challenge (Western) foundational assumptions, decentralise knowledge production, and globalise ontologies from the South has also taken hold in the field of international relations (IR). Critical reflection on the racist and imperial lineage of the discipline has represented a first step in an aspirational transition towards a decolonised global IR that is founded on 'pluralistic universalism' and recognises difference, but 'eschews exceptionalism' (Acharya 2014, 649; see also Thakur, Davis, and Vale 2017).

In this call for 'pluralistic universalism', we identify a second meaning of 'global'. This relates more specifically to the *raison d'être* of academic enquiry. Here, 'global' acts as the geographic twin of multidisciplinary, calling for coordinated efforts to devise theories that travel across space, accounting for difference yet remaining useful and intelligible for a global audience concerned with convergence and comparison as much as with difference. This 'global' seeks to neutralise the inward-looking tendencies that characterise some area study approaches, while also avoiding the Earth-flattening narratives often espoused by globalo-optimists. The work of economic geographers who investigate the embeddedness of capitalism through variegated and multi-scalar manifestations exemplifies this approach (Zhang and Peck 2016). Development geographers also typically address the complex and contested grounding of global forces in various Southern – and increasingly Northern – geographies (Mawdsley 2017). These geographic traditions show us that idiosyncrasy is not conflicted with comparison, and that the local and the global can be studied in a dialectic manner.

Finally, the third related meaning of 'global' refers to the *ontological and epistemological basis* of the analytical endeavour. This is a 'global' that recognises a planetary scale of enquiry and that cautions against the prevalence of methodological nationalism in the social sciences. Examples abound also in the field of geography, where researchers scrutinise multi-scalar processes while challenging the 'territorial trap' of the nation-state (Agnew 1994). Some historians have also turned their attention towards the world history of certain commodities to examine the development of capitalist modernity through a multitude of interconnected sites and processes – an enterprise that, despite its contemporary appeal, can be traced back to Eric Williams' study of sugar's role in the inception of global capitalism (Williams 1984; Beckert 2014). Similarly, critical political economists, always more attentive to the struggles of the Global South than their mainstream peers, have rejected the methodological nationalism of IR and international political economy (IPE), and transitioned towards a 'global political economy' (GPE) that calls into question the centrality of states, reinstates class analysis and is attentive to forces of planetary scale (Cammack 2007; Carroll, Gonzalez-Vicente, and Jarvis 2019).

Following these three conceptualisations of the 'global', we contend that a truly global IR needs to globalise the production of knowledge, speak to a global audience and adopt a multi-scalar perspective that considers the planetary dimension of phenomena such as the world market or climate change. Thus, the agenda for global IR requires bringing critical Southern perspectives to bear on processes of planetary relevance. These perspectives and theories should be appraised as something more than insights into localised experiences and the psyche of the 'other'. Rather, the Global South must constitute an essential departing point in the study of the globalised conditions of late capitalism.

To illustrate our propositions, we revisit the tradition of Critical Caribbean Development Thought (CCDT) and apply it to the study of China–Caribbean relations. By giving the main

stage to theorists from the region, we hope not only to capture the nuance of Sino–Caribbean relations but also to restore the work and spirit of scholars who were committed to empowering the region’s capacity for agency and independent critical thought. CCDT offers a theoretically robust and politically empowering alternative to otherwise predominantly empirical accounts of the Caribbean’s relationship with China, raising important questions about continuing epistemic dependency, structural impediments to development in small and highly open states, and a number of unresolved issues relating to the postcolonial condition in former plantation societies. Drawing upon these insights, we explain how the expectations placed on the emerging ‘South–South’ link with China are easily overstated, given China’s elitist business-centric approach to development, the eschewing of participatory approaches in Sino–Caribbean ventures, the ‘passive incorporation’ of the Caribbean into China’s global vision and the competitive pressures inherent to a consolidated world market.

The essay is organised as follows. The first section revisits the tradition of CCDT, with an explicit but not exclusive focus on the English-speaking Caribbean, and suggests updates that account for the transformation of the global economy since the 1980s. The second section introduces Sino–Caribbean relations. The remaining sections apply a series of theoretical and analytical CCDT insights into the analysis of Sino–Caribbean relations. We conclude by recapitulating the enduring relevance of CCDT in the context of global IR.

### **The emergence, decline and continued relevance of critical Caribbean development thought**

The central position that the Caribbean occupied in the emergence of a global economy from the sixteenth century to the eighteenth explains how a region of its relatively small size (46 million inhabitants today) became so influential, in both economic and intellectual terms. Caribbean sugar occupied in the eighteenth century the central place that steel and cotton would take over in the nineteenth century, and oil in the twentieth, mobilising financial, human and natural resources from three continents for European consumption and accumulation (Williams 1984, 121). The Caribbean plantation economies relied on a new kind of large-scale enslavement that ‘combined ancient forms of brutality with the quintessentially modern social form of value production’ (Anderson 2020). This system would in turn breed some of the world’s most influential anti-colonial thought. Thus, the region would become the setting for the modern world’s first successful anti-slavery uprising, in Haiti (1791–1803), home to some of the most influential revolutionary figures of the twentieth century, such as Marcus Garvey and Fidel Castro, and the birthplace of intellectuals who would lead debates on the colonial and postcolonial condition, such as Frantz Fanon, Norman Girvan, Stuart Hall, C. L. R. James, Claudia Jones, José Martí, George Padmore, Walter Rodney and Sylvia Wynter (Reddock 2014).

In this way, the Caribbean’s tradition of critical thinking on development emerged out of a broader effort to resist colonialism and racism – both understood as derivatives of capitalist exploitation (Henry 2001). Much of the progressive intellectual scholarship in the region was fuelled by, and had a symbiotic relationship with, radical projects in the 1960s and early 1970s such as Rastafarianism, the Black Power Movement, socialism and the Third World’s quest for a New International Economic Order (Girvan 2010). As such, CCDT was part of a wider intellectual endeavour about the kind of social, economic and political order that should be pursued in the post-independence era (Girvan 2020). Inspired by these multiple movements, many Caribbean intellectuals shared a diagnosis for the underdevelopment of

the region, attributing Caribbean underdevelopment to the unequal relations emanating from the Caribbean's passive insertion in the global economy. However, a schism emerged between those who proposed a complete overhaul of the capitalist system and those who ideated solutions within it (Best and Levitt 2009).

Carl Stone, Walter Rodney and C. Y. Thomas were among the former. Their emphasis on class struggle resonated in the highly stratified Caribbean societies of the time, and their analysis of the unequal international division of labour in the postcolonial world gained adepts in the region and beyond – see for example Rodney's *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (Rodney 1975, 2018; Stone 1983, 1986; Thomas 1986). Situated within the Marxist orthodoxy of the time – which identified imperialism as a high stage of capitalism (Lenin 1970) – these scholars understood that social development could only be realised if the existing economic system was replaced in its entirety (Bishop 2013; Stone 1986; Thomas 1986). Emerging in the 1960s, the Plantation Economy School – espoused by intellectuals of the New World Group – shared the crux of the analysis, but sought to provide solutions suited to the peculiarities of Caribbean economies within the existing capitalist framework. Its key proponents included Lloyd Best, George Beckford, Kari Levitt, Norman Girvan and James Millette.

The Plantation School's position became more prominent as the region gradually gained political independence. These scholars reassessed Arthur Lewis' proposals to promote agricultural productivity as a stepping stone towards the development of a competitive manufacturing sector (Lewis 1954). Contrary to Lewis, they maintained that the establishment of a free peasantry and the availability of surplus labour – which could facilitate diversification away from sugar production – was not enough to increase productive capacity and 'break the traditional mercantilist links' (Best and Levitt 2009, 196). The best lands remained largely in the plantation sector, the economy was managed from the metropole and the Caribbean maintained a role of 'hinterlands – a source of material and produce and an outlet for final goods' (Best and Levitt 2009, 198). Hence, while Lewis surmised that the Caribbean agricultural sector could mature sufficiently to transition industrially and technologically, scholars from the Plantation School were more sceptical. Lloyd Best disparagingly referred to Lewis' proposals as 'industrialization by invitation', given that Lewis' model relied on foreign investment to accumulate capital for industrial transformation – even if Lewis saw the development of a local capitalist and professional class as the 'ultimate key to the successful development of the Caribbean' (Figueroa 2019, 12; see also Best and Levitt 2009). In short, whereas Lewis maintained that international trade and investment could kickstart the development process, the Plantation School saw in these links the very roots of underdevelopment.

The continued dependence on the plantation sector and other similarly foreign-controlled, natural resource-based and export-oriented sectors provided a good explanation of the external underpinnings of postcolonial underdevelopment (Girvan 2009). However, the Plantation School also explored how the dependent and exploitative ties with the metropole had shaped internal social, economic and political institutional arrangements that would persist after independence (Beckford 1972, xxii). Some of the most distinct contributions of CCDT coalesce in the dialectical relation between internal and external processes. Here, the idea of 'epistemic dependency' stands out. Epistemic dependency expands the analysis of dependency beyond the economic basis and espouses it also as a 'syndrome in [the region's] psychological makeup' (Beckford 1972, 234–35). The idea resonates with Frantz Fanon's understanding of national consciousness in the postcolonial world as a product of the local bourgeoisie's 'intellectual laziness [...], of its spiritual penury, and of the profoundly cosmopolitan

mould that its mind is set in' (Fanon 2001, 119). From this perspective, independence had been a mere takeover of (neo)colonial administration as well as merchant and professional roles by local elites – or, in other words, little more than 'flag independence' (Barriteau 2007). As such, it remained constrained both by international economic hierarchies and by the region's postcolonial inability to reimagine development independently.

Therefore, the first step towards an alternative regional vision was the development of independent Caribbean political thought (Best 1967; Northover and Crichlow 2005). The peculiar challenges of the region needed to be addressed, in particular its dependence due to its small size, high degree of openness and ties to former colonial powers. This dependence was seen to pervade various sectors of the economy. These included the monetary system, which depended on a metropolitan currency and a foreign-owned banking system; public financing, which was serviced by foreign loans and grants; and the extractive industries, which were at the mercy of multinational corporations that controlled the necessary technologies (Girvan 2010). In the immediate post-World War II period (1940s and 1950s), the Anglophone Caribbean followed Lewis' proposals for industrialisation via foreign investment. This strategy yielded positive outcomes in growth and living standards, but failed to emerge as a self-sustaining formula for growth and socio-economic development (Keith and Keith 1992).

The Caribbean turned to import substitution industrialisation strategies in the 1960s and 1970s, developing manufacturing bases in Trinidad and Tobago, Jamaica and Barbados. However, local manufacturing was unable to tackle unemployment or to truly substitute imports (ECLAC 2000). Jamaica, under the leadership of Michael Manley and the People's National Party, implemented a programme of democratic socialism in 1974, nationalising the bauxite sector and strengthening trade unions and worker rights (Stephens and Stephens 2017). However, low economic productivity, external pressures (eg a CIA-led destabilization campaign) and the debt crisis of the 1980s would bring the experiment to a halt. 'Cooperative socialism' in Guyana under Forbes Burnham had a similarly redistributive rhetoric, yet Stone (1986) has surmised that this model displayed more elements of economic nationalism than of actual socialism. The Grenada model of 1979–1983 exposed a more committed socialist orientation, as it included full worker participation in the management and profits of state and parastatal enterprises. It achieved massive improvements in social welfare programmes prior to the US invasion of 1983 (Stone 1986).

Some of the historical shocks sketched above – debt crisis, US interventions – would precipitate the decline of CCDT. Other dynamics were internal. Around the early 1970s, the New World Group split, and its members left in different directions (Meeks 2014). The schism between Marxist socialists and Plantation School scholars remain unresolved, with each group accusing the other of dependence on external influences, theoretical and methodological errors, and unrealistic expectations. As New World ideas gained popular acceptance in the revolutionary fervour of the 1970s, some intellectuals were drawn towards direct political action (Meeks 2014). Paradoxically, this meant that the group lost its scholarly commitment. The rise of nationalism and the growing intolerance of some Caribbean governments also contributed to the New World group's demise. Increasingly, nationalist leaders and university managers became wary of the group's interference in national affairs, and promoted the 'nationalisation' of the staff of the individual campuses of The University of the West Indies. The latter gave rise to 'new educated elites with a vested interest in insular nationhood' (Girvan 2010, 11).

The neoliberal turn in the global economy also adversely impacted the study of development economics in the region (Girvan 2009, 2010; Levitt 2009; Meeks 2001; Henry 2001). As state-driven development approaches declined in popularity, a new paradigm emerged in which the market became pre-eminent. While Trinidad continued to prosper in the 1980s from the 1970s oil boom, democratic socialism was crushed in Jamaica, Guyana's version of socialism morphed into racially biased authoritarianism and the Grenadian experiment was aborted by US intervention. Academia, business and government shifted to survival mode. Training in political economy became subordinated to management education with a business-oriented mindset (Levitt 2009). By the early 1990s neoliberal ideology had swept across the Caribbean, 'whether by conviction', force or the perception that there were no 'viable alternatives' (Levitt 2009, 192). Indeed, some authors within the region have carried the torch of critical scholarship to our days, for example Violet Eudine Barriteau, Anthony Bogues, Tennyson Joseph, Don Marshall, Patricia Northover and Rhoda Reddock. However, their most critical insights have often been sidelined in regional policy debates.

Despite its relative contemporary ostracism, CCDT remains relevant for a number of reasons. The Caribbean's increased participation in a globalised economy only emphasises Girvan's note of caution about 'the consequences of passive incorporation into the world economy' (Girvan 2009, xxii). As noted above, such a mode of incorporation is both ideational and structural, and has as one of its corollaries the enduring hegemony of merchant capital over production (Marshall 2002, 727). The structure of underdevelopment has, however, transformed. Hierarchies that were once international are today global, with states increasingly catering to transnational capital (Carroll, Gonzalez-Vicente, and Jarvis 2019). Here, the wider Caribbean region plays a dual role. On the one hand, the region is particularly vulnerable to the fluctuations of the global economy, as its economies remain heavily reliant 'on a narrow range of products and service markets' despite the expansion of manufacturing in the mid-1970s (ECLAC 2000, 1). On the other hand, some Caribbean economies, and in particular British Overseas Territories, have become key anchors of the financialised and transnationalised (offshore) global economy. While some Caribbean professional elites have profited from this, the main beneficiaries remain in the transnational capitalist class rather than in the region's majority.

The Caribbean participates today in a global economy that is more integrated than it was in the 1960s and 1970s (see ECLAC 2000). National development strategies are aligned to both World Trade Organization (WTO) obligations and bilateral partnerships, limiting the manoeuvring space. Therefore, while the underlying philosophy and general principles of CCDT continue to be relevant, references to these frameworks in discussing the Caribbean's development challenges must necessarily take account of the new global environment. Here, without a doubt, the emergence of China as a key trade and investment partner, as well as a 'development finance' powerhouse, is of critical importance.

### **The Sino–Caribbean development nexus**

The Caribbean, like most developing regions, felt the first shockwaves of China's economic ascendance in indirect ways. Acutely decimated by two decades of neoliberal austerity, countries within the region that aspired to develop globally competitive manufacturing

bases saw those aspirations thwarted by China's growing competitiveness since the 1990s – while consumers in the region benefitted from access to cheap products imported from China. Additionally, economies with an abundance of natural resources found in China a market and a driver for high commodity prices during the 2003–2013 resource boom. With the exception of Cuba, which had developed important trade and investment relations with China following the collapse of the USSR in the early 1990s (Hearn 2012), most Caribbean economies started to develop more solid economic ties with the Asian country towards the late 2000s. Bilateral trade between the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) and China was USD 3.4 billion in 2018 (Baksh et al. 2020), out of USD 46 billion of total CARICOM trade (UN Comtrade 2018). Today, investment (over USD 9 billion in CARICOM<sup>1</sup>) and finance (around USD 8.9 billion in loans to CARICOM countries) are the two most prominent vectors through which the People's Republic of China (PRC) shapes the trajectory of Caribbean development.

We observe three types of Chinese investments in the Caribbean region, which may be accompanied by varying degrees of state financing. In the first group are companies that have a cumulative impact in the region's economy. These companies invest in consolidated sectors such as tourism in Bahamas and Barbados, and in rising sectors such as the oil industry in Guyana. Their impact is cumulative in that they join other transnational investors and add on to existing trends within the region – although the initial investment may benefit from access to cheap credit from Chinese policy banks. In the second group are a number of Chinese businesses that invest in sunset industries. These companies have been able to cut managerial salaries and other production costs (see Lee 2017 on the austere 'managerial ethos' at Chinese companies in Zambia). In Jamaica, for example, Chinese investments of over USD 260 million helped to keep the country's decaying sugar sector afloat for a number of years (more on this below).

Similarly, the Jiuquan Iron and Steel Company (JISCO) was able to bring Jamaica's ALPART alumina processing plant back into businesses after it had lain abandoned for nine years. JISCO's strategy included a reduction of costs in managerial salaries, the use of Chinese labour with different levels of qualification, and the increased casualisation of local labour, now hired under shorter term contracts with salaries that are lower than those received in 2009. JISCO's operations in Jamaica are also characterised by a distinct 'logics of accumulation' (Lee 2017). As a state-owned enterprise that is not entirely liable to short-term shareholder pressures for immediate profitability, JISCO has developed a plan to halt its operations since October 2019 in order to modernise the plant over a three-year period (Jamaica Observer 2019). The fact that a Chinese state-owned enterprise sees potential where others did not is related to the strategic status of aluminium in China, whereby its use value within the Chinese economy takes prevalence over the exchange value in international markets (Lu 2020). The case illustrates how, operating under an 'encompassing accumulation' logics (Lee 2017), Chinese investors can have a differential impact and boost economic activities that are otherwise unattractive to global private capital. However, serious questions remain about the developmental prospects of this and other investments, which have often been the target of complaints over labour exploitation and environmental and public health impacts.

The third type of Chinese investment involves a tandem of Chinese state finance and construction companies, and it is perhaps the most prominent in regional debates. Chinese construction companies made their first inroads in the region with the 2007 Cricket World Cup, when they helped to finance and construct or upgrade stadiums in Antigua and



Barbuda, Jamaica and Grenada (the latter amid diplomatic disputes with Taiwan). Chinese contractors have evolved from this niche and are now involved in expanding ports and airports (eg Antigua and Barbuda, Guyana), building roads (eg Bahamas, Jamaica), constructing and rehabilitating hotels and resorts (eg Bahamas, Barbados, Guyana), developing government buildings and hospitals (eg Antigua and Barbuda, Trinidad and Tobago), erecting convention centres and auditoriums (eg Antigua and Barbuda, Guyana, Jamaica, Trinidad and Tobago), and planning industrial parks (eg Antigua, Jamaica and Trinidad). While a few companies have transited into private procurement, most of them operate within government-to-government frameworks. These arrangements are characterised by close negotiations between the Chinese and local governments, and involve a loan from a Chinese policy bank (usually at market rate; see Bräutigam and Gallagher 2014) to purchase the services of a Chinese state-owned contractor. Local governments provide sovereign guarantees for repayment, which reduces risks on the bank's investment. In some cases, the loans can be paid for with commodities or public assets. This has been the case for Jamaica's North–South highway, where a USD 457 million loan from the China Development Bank (CDB) was paid for with a 1200-acre land concession (Gonzalez-Vicente 2020).

These arrangements introduce a new 'mechanism of accumulation' in the region, dependent not on global firms devoted to financial markets and shareholder value, but on the Chinese entrepreneurial state apparatus (Gonzalez-Vicente 2011, 2020). This mechanism has reactivated government spending in a region where many economies are crippled by high degrees of public debt (Rustomjee 2017). In turn, it has also opened debates about debt sustainability, and raised questions about the prices paid for projects that are not subject to open tenders. The answer to these questions depends on the capacity of Chinese infrastructures to act as multipliers of economic activity, improve living standards for vulnerable and excluded populations, and respect the region's natural wealth. From these various perspectives, Chinese investments have not significantly contributed to lifting the region from its developmental impasse, as we explain below. Moreover, while Chinese-financed infrastructures do not require wholesale macroeconomic reform, as traditional multilateral lending does, they necessitate spaces of exception (Gonzalez-Vicente 2019). Throughout the region, governments have waived labour regulations and taxes in Chinese construction sites (Tudoroiu and Ramlogan 2020b). In these spaces of exception, Chinese contractors are often exempted from custom duties on machinery and operate with large contingents of Chinese workers who cannot join local independent unions and who are paid Chinese salaries in Chinese bank accounts.

Overall, while some of these trends may seem transformative, it is important to note that Chinese enterprises have readily engaged the region's liberal regimes. At the same time, they have also deployed innovative mechanisms that expand markets and with them, inevitably, processes of uneven development. In what follows, we address four themes prevalent in CCDT in order to explain and theorise the underlying dynamics of Chinese capitalism in the region.

### Epistemic dependency

From Fanon to Beckford, or Garvey to Best, Caribbean thinkers placed emancipated political thought at the centre of the struggle for postcolonial freedom. The question of epistemic dependency continues to burden regional politics – whether this is in the form of elevation of European cultural practices, or Washington's tutelage over regional development policy

(Girvan 2012, 5). Within this context, the PRC's engagement in the region has paradoxically restored political leeway to central government leaders while simultaneously contributing to undermine emancipatory development approaches. We identify three emerging trends associated with China's engagement in the region: increased political manoeuvring space away from US and EU guidance, reinforcement of a narrow developmental trajectory, and weakening of social participation and subsequent consolidation of elite development thought (see Selwyn 2016).

Regarding the first of these trends, the introduction of Chinese finance in the region has allowed regional leaders to triangulate in search of better credit terms (Bernal 2016). The lack of macroeconomic conditionalities has turned many governments in the region towards Chinese banks, which have signed loans to CARICOM countries totalling around USD 8.9 billion since 2000 (Minto 2019a). Regional politicians frequently contrast the flexible Chinese approach with the rigidity of International Monetary Fund (IMF) lending (The Daily Observer 2014). Whereas Chinese banks also offer a fixed lending template, this is a template that in certain junctures suits the interests of regional economies better. Caribbean countries can now seek external finance without needing to embrace the wholesale neoliberalisation of their economies. This is not merely a minor victory, as conditional lending has been a major source of discontent in the region since the debt crisis of the early 1980s (Black 2001). Moreover, contrary to some commentary on China's 'debt trap diplomacy', actual data suggests that Chinese policy banks are relatively open to renegotiating lending terms in favour of the borrowing country – particularly when other sources of finance are available (Kratz, Feng, and Wright 2019). Therefore, loans that are part of broader infrastructure deals are now popular across the region – while also heatedly debated after leading to seven cancelled or stalled projects at a value of USD 4.2 billion (Minto 2019a, 153).

There are, however, limits to the flexibility of Chinese loans, and indeed to their role as catalysts for emancipatory development models. The region experiences already high degrees of liberalisation – particularly in terms of marketisation and openness to trade and investment. In this context, Chinese loans have not been used to roll back neoliberal reform but to honour existing debts and increase public spending on infrastructure. Infrastructural loans are destined for culture and leisure (eg cricket stadiums and convention centres), government buildings, a small number of medical facilities, or, more often, a wide array of projects that seek to enhance comparative advantages within a liberal market order. In the latter category we find transportation infrastructure, hotels and resorts, and a number of planned industrial parks and special economic zones in countries like Trinidad, Jamaica, and Antigua and Barbuda. In general, Chinese finance has allowed some regional economies to circumvent the liberalisation and 'good governance' agendas promoted by the IMF, World Bank or Inter-American Development Bank. However, countries in the region have fallen short of completing a post-liberal turn. This stands in relative contrast to countries such as Ecuador under Rafael Correa's presidency. The latter galvanised Chinese loans to default on sovereign bonds in 2008 and pushed forward a post-liberal agenda that in its early days embraced elements of Andean indigenous understandings of the good life – even if failing to resolve key postcolonial and market inequalities (Gonzalez-Vicente 2017).

Chinese investments and finance are also limited in terms of content, and as such they foment a narrow developmental template. Here, it is important to note that the current wave of Chinese investments as part of the Belt and Road Initiative responds not to benevolent goals but to a crisis of overaccumulation in China's construction sector (Gonzalez-Vicente

2019). Therefore, these investments are constrained to a limited number of sectors, and tend to emphasise infrastructural growth and natural resource exploitation. The most egregious example of the limits to this approach came in 2017, when news emerged that the CDB was helping the government of Grenada draft a national development strategy that involved the construction of a highway, a railway, a deep-water port, a wind farm and the modernisation of the Maurice Bishop International Airport – as well as a call to take strong measures to protect the rights of foreign investors (Chen 2017). While Grenada's Prime Minister would later clarify that other parties had also been approached and only China responded, and that eventually 'any national plan will have to be endorsed by the people of the country' (Barnacle News 2018), the case highlighted the enduring dependence on external models of development.

China's engagement in the region has also narrowed the scope of social participation. Infrastructural agreements are reached in government-to-government negotiations and bypass open tenders. This has consolidated a model of top-down elite-led governance that eschews transparency and participation in terms of decision-making and scrutiny (Raymond 2014). Projects are approved without standing the test of public deliberation, and as such they cannot serve as the basis for a truly emancipatory developmental paradigm. Some of the more recent plans to develop special economic zones with Chinese capital, such as the Phoenix Park in southern Trinidad, could indicate a resurgence of state economic planning. However, expectations still need to be matched by results, and there are major structural constraints that suggest success in these areas is unlikely (see below). Moreover, such success under the current socio-economic circumstances would produce very uneven forms of development that would chiefly benefit transnational investors and local merchant capitalist elites.

In sum, a narrow developmental imaginary seems to coalesce when the capabilities and interests of Chinese investors are brought together with the constraints that local political and business elites face in envisioning long-term development goals. Girvan traced these constraints in Jamaica to the fact that the decades-long IMF control over economic policy had severely decimated the government's capacity for autonomous planning (Girvan 2012). Other explanations can also be sought in the austerity measures that neoliberalised academia and pushed scholars and pundits to fund their research through consultancies to the World Bank, European Union and other agencies (Joseph 2017); in the immediate urgency for jobs and investment that tends to invite improvisation and hamper forward-looking strategies; or the prevalence of merchant capital and 'conservative enterprise culture' among local bourgeoisies (Marshall 2002, 747).

### Passive incorporation

CCDT scholars have often remarked how the region was 'passively incorporated' into the international economy, a trend that is not divorced from the question of epistemic dependency (Girvan 2009). Passive incorporation entailed a structurally subservient economic role during the colonial years, persisting economic dependency in the immediate postcolonial period, and extreme vulnerability in the world market amid high levels of liberalisation since the 1980s. Like other small states, Caribbean island states share a series of characteristics that exacerbate their vulnerability: small populations, limited human and natural resources, small physical and economic size, distance from international markets and a high level of openness. As a result, Caribbean economies find it difficult to cushion exogenous shocks,

such as external economic crises, natural disasters and climate change (IMF 2013). Whereas the nascent relation with China holds significant potential, several constraints block the region's ability to fully harness these opportunities. In what follows we highlight three of these constraints: the exacerbation of production hierarchies and trade imbalances, the structural limitations associated to the types of Chinese investment available in the region, and the ways in which low transparency impedes an effective regulation of investment flows.

Within a global liberal economic order, economic development in China has tended to exacerbate international hierarchies of production and trade imbalances. This is due first of all to the gradual relocation of value chains to Asia, and secondly to the ways in which urban and industrial growth in Asia has increased the pressure on commodity consumption. In this context, trade between China and the Caribbean has risen exponentially. Commodity exporters have enjoyed a growing demand for their products (Jamaica – aluminium oxide; Trinidad and Tobago – oil and gas; Suriname and Guyana – minerals and timber). Conversely, all Caribbean economies import finished manufactured goods from China, which has resulted in negative trade balances (Díaz 2016; Wenner and Clarke 2016). However, China cannot be seen as a buoyant 'metropole' in the classical dependency theory sense. Rather than unilaterally concentrating financial and industrial capacity, China has emerged instead a hub for transnationalised production (Gonzalez-Vicente 2012), where a majority of the population endures in fact lower living standards than the citizens of many Caribbean countries. And yet, China's key economic features – a huge low-wage labour force and a high demand for commodities for urbanisation and globalised production – have tended to crowd other developing economies out of manufacturing sectors and push them further into a commodity-producing role (while some low-cost manufacturing has in recent years moved from China into South and Southeast Asia).

Under late capitalism, dependency is not international towards a defined set of countries, but global towards mobile flows of transnational capital. Nonetheless, under these new conditions, the structural burdens of the Caribbean remain disturbingly similar to those discussed by classical CCDT authors. The region faces high current account trade imbalances, resulting from a low level of diversification of markets and products (ECLAC 2018), an erosion of preferences for agricultural commodities and garment exports (Bishop et al. 2011), and some of the highest debt burdens in the world relative to economic size (ECLAC 2018). As Caribbean states have been categorised as middle-income economies (and above), some have graduated from bilateral and multilateral grants and other forms of concessional funding. High levels of poverty and income inequality persist despite good progress on human development (ECLAC 2018). This situation is compounded by the burdensome conditions for the repayment of international loans. More recently, the region has faced the threat of termination or restriction of correspondent banking services and their participation in the global banking system because of the perception of high risk associated with doing business with them (ECLAC 2018).

The focus of Chinese investments on infrastructures or consolidated sectors (natural resources or tourism) adds on to these trends. This was most acute in tourism-dependent countries in the aftermath of the Global Financial Crisis, whereas waning resource prices at the end of the 2003–2013 resource boom took a dent on commodity exporters (ECLAC 2018; IDB 2018). Chinese investments and loans in infrastructure surpass other areas of development, with 18 out of 23 loans of China's policy banks in the region concentrated

in this sector (Gallagher and Myers 2020). Without careful planning, large infrastructural projects will struggle to generate sufficient economic capacity to make up for a rising debt burden. With the possible exception of a number of yet-to-be realised industrial parks, Chinese infrastructural projects have not been focussed on the region's key economic constraints, such as promoting production or integrating the region into economies of scale.

The questions of labour opportunities and technology transfer have also been points of contention. Traditional sectors such as natural resource extraction and tourism are renowned for creating a limited number of jobs or placing locals in low-skilled service roles, while the control of these industries is typically in the hands of foreign investors (Pattullo 2005). Adding to these trends is the fact that many Chinese construction projects rely on contingents of Chinese labour, limiting local employment opportunities. This has been deemed inimical for development, even if the ratio of Chinese and local labour is subject to negotiations, with those projects employing a higher percentage of local workers resulting in higher costs (Gonzalez-Vicente 2019).

Overall, there are serious concerns that Chinese firms may be undercutting national contractors thanks to a series of privileges, rather than to their inherent competitiveness (Kelly 2019). These include access to inexpensive credit, tax breaks and duty-free concessions on equipment and materials, and exclusive access to cheap Chinese labour. The counterarguments here would be that infrastructures can improve productive capacity, and that the Chinese state has provided a number of scholarships for West Indians to pursue an education in the PRC. Yet while improvements in logistics or skills training can indeed result in positive outcomes, the questions of foreign capital control and passive incorporation remain, while the Caribbean continues to endure one of the world's highest levels of youth unemployment and emigration of tertiary-educated and skilled individuals (ECLAC 2018).

### **The (still) elusive quest for regional integration**

The small size of Caribbean economies and the fragmentation of their approach to global challenges have traditionally worked to reinforce some of the trends described above. In particular, the inability to act as a market or institutional block weakens the region's negotiating capacity, impedes the development of economies of scale, and creates redundancies in the public sector. Thereby, regional integration and cross-regional solidarity have been central to emancipatory agendas. However, Girvan's (2011) concern about the subordination of regional interests to national priorities is evident in the CARICOM–China relationship, and particularly given China's general avoidance of substantial regional agreements, preference for bilateral relations, and eschewing of civil society participation.

The roots of the Caribbean regional integration project go back to various island federation attempts in the seventeenth century. The project regained traction in the twentieth century with the West Indies Federation (1958–1962) and the Caribbean Free Trade Area (1965), culminating with the establishment of CARICOM in 1973. The formation of the Association of Caribbean States (ACS) in 1994 broadened the regional scope, while the CARICOM Single Market and Economy, launched in 2006, pushed the regionalism agenda in a neoliberal direction (Payne and Sutton 2007). The project of regional integration faced challenges prior to China's rise as a significant economic force in the region. CARICOM

engages in a minimalist approach to integration and functions as a community of sovereign states based on a model of intergovernmentalism in which member states retain their sovereignty in cooperation arrangements (Grenade 2011). CARICOM also adopts a top-down approach to decision-making to the near exclusion of civil society and private sector engagement (Bishop et al. 2011). Moreover, the economic divergences and varying or competing interests between member states also cause problems for foreign policy coordination (Girvan 2011; Grenade 2011).

China's mode of engagement has further fractured the regional project. The PRC has promoted a number of forums with diverse regional foci, but these exclude some CARICOM members. Caribbean leaders have participated in some of these, such as the Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation, the CELAC–China Summit, and the China/Caribbean Economic and Trade Cooperation Forum. Excluding the latter, the role reserved for Caribbean states is nominal. Also, despite facilitating socialisation, these forums are invariably focussed on 'generating good will and prestige for Beijing, despite the fact that the overwhelming content of relations [...] still flow through bilateral channels' (Alden and Alves 2017; see also Tudoroiu and Ramlogan 2020a). There is, in short, little substance beyond vague pledges towards the broader region that only materialise in bilateral negotiations. The forums are also notorious for their exclusion of civil society. CARICOM should remain in this sense the prime forum for regional cooperation in the relation with China. However, CARICOM's interests are often 'compromised as it attempts to coordinate and leverage such a large number of players with competing interests,' something that has been exacerbated by the One China Policy (Montoute 2015, 7). Given that a number of members (Belize, Haiti, Saint Kitts and Nevis, Saint Lucia and Saint Vincent and the Grenadines) do not hold formal diplomatic relations with the PRC, China's diplomacy bypasses CARICOM.

China's preference for bilateral engagement has also encouraged competition rather than collaboration for Chinese development cooperation (Montoute 2013). In this regard, the prospect of CARICOM's leveraging the Belt and Road Initiative for regional connectivity looks dim, and it has instead fomented race-to-the-bottom competition among member countries to host some of China's projected infrastructures. These include, for example, a much-debated deep-water port to facilitate the distribution of container cargo throughout the region. Thus, China's approach has empowered central government elites through bilateral dealings while closing off spaces for supranational regulation and bottom-up civil society participation (Gonzalez-Vicente 2015). Combined with CARICOM's own shortcomings, China's growing role in the region is bound to make the possibility for effective regional cooperation an even more distant prospect.

### The postcolonial condition

So far, we have used the three broad themes above to unpack perennial questions in the relation between the Caribbean and the global economy, and to offer analytical insights into the region's contemporary relations with China. In this last section we use the broad theme of the 'postcolonial condition' to address the internal sociological makeup of the Caribbean region as evolved from former plantation economies and into their current hybrid selves. In particular, we want to clarify that the Caribbean is not only 'impacted' by China, but that there exists a dialectical tension between the Caribbean's pre-existing social configurations and its shifting international linkages, particularly regarding questions of class

relations, racial and gender dynamics, state configuration, and the co-constitution of national identities and modernity imaginaries. Therefore, Chinese businesses in the region are not only external vectors of change, but become local actors subject to transformation in the context of Caribbean social relations and agency.

A first example can be found in the ill-fated investments of Complant International in the sugar sector in Jamaica. Complant arrived in Jamaica in 2010, acquiring three factories and leasing around 18,000 hectares in the south of the island for a period of 49 years. The ambitious plan to reduce operation costs by 30% and boost productivity did not yield the expected outcomes despite drastic cuts in the labour force (Minto 2019b). Chinese entrepreneurs have blamed their poor performance on questions of low productivity and cultural barriers for communication (Jamaica Gleaner 2017). However, what is missing in this analysis is an in-depth understanding of the socio-political complexity of the sector in its Jamaican context. The decline of productivity in the sugar sector following independence was met by Prime Minister Michael Manley with a commitment to full employment as a form of social justice (Manley 1974, 90). Building on this sensibility and electoral politics, the sector developed orientated towards livelihood provision through political party-centred clientelistic networks with weak regulations and incentives, rather than towards global competitiveness (Drori and Gayle 1990; Northover 2001). Sugar, of course, also occupies a complex position in the region's historical memory, being at the same time central to its culture and economic organisation and symbolic of severe labour exploitation in the plantation economies. In such a context, attempts to boost productivity such as the Chinese-led ones were necessarily in tension with local models of subsistence and sociocultural expectations.

However, pre-existing social structures do not necessarily act so as to block the advance of Chinese capital. In certain situations, they can actually facilitate it. Our second example is one of electoral politics. In Trinidad and Tobago, very much like Guyana, racial divisions translate into ethnic voting patterns. While the exact definition of and attitudes towards ethnic difference have shifted through time (Abraham 2001), today there are in Trinidad two major parties, one of them (the People's National Movement – PNM) having a majority Afro-Trinidadian electorate, and the other (the United National Congress – UNC) supported mostly by Indo-Trinidadians. In this context, the National Academy of Performing Arts was inaugurated in 2009 as the flagship project of Prime Minister Patrick Manning's (PNM) dealings with China. The project, constructed by the Shanghai Construction Group (SCG), was not exempt from controversies, on issues such as flaws in its original design, significant cost overruns, potential embezzlement, and the need to close down the building six years after its inauguration for major repairs (Oosterveld, Wilms, and Kertysova 2018). Despite delivering severe critiques while in the opposition, Kamla Persad-Bissessar's administration (UNC, 2010–2015) would continue with the construction of a similar facility, the Southern Academy of Performing Arts (SAPA), also built by the SCG and completed in 2012. SAPA is located in the city of San Fernando, and the priority given by the UNC to this facility during their years in power has been associated with the complex geographical voting and ethnic patterns in Trinidad, with many UNC votes concentrated in the central plains since the 1960s (Premdas 2004).

In sum, electoral politics pushed both major parties to rely on Chinese loans and corporations to augment their infrastructural legacies. Meanwhile, the Artists Coalition of Trinidad and Tobago protested the failure to consult local artists. Fundamentally challenging the

Chinese infrastructure-based development approach, they reminded their country's leaders that 'development is not about buildings. It is about people; the energy of the people' (quoted in *Newsday* 2010).

## Conclusion

CCDT offers invaluable insights into the analysis and theorisation of Chinese capital in the Caribbean. Decades ago, regional scholars developed theories and analytical insights on epistemic dependency, passive incorporation, regional integration and postcolonial development that are still relevant today, and which remain pertinent for understanding the region's contemporary relationship with China. Perhaps less evident is the fact that at least two of these theories – epistemic dependency and passive incorporation – can also shed light on the dynamics of China's Belt and Road Initiative beyond the Caribbean. As the Chinese government invites its counterparts to join the Belt and Road Initiative and Chinese capital penetrates new markets, large swaths of the developing world are being passively integrated into the Chinese government's global vision and into the world market, often exacerbating structural constraints and epistemic dependency, and in the process hindering bottom-up processes of emancipatory development.

The exercise we have conducted demonstrates the possibility of constructing a truly 'global' approach to IR, where knowledges from the Global South are mobilised to theorise, analyse and, if necessary, contest processes of planetary relevance. The exercise pursues two parallel goals: to challenge geographies of knowledge that have tended to privilege 'Western' academic orthodoxy, and to contribute to devolving political agency into regions that were for decades subsumed to neoliberal development thought and praxis, and which are today tempted by the similarly elitist and business-centric approach of the PRC. With this, we are not claiming that research on a given region should necessarily rely on theories advanced by local authors (this would be the opposite of a 'global' approach). Yet a truly globalised IR should actively engage the multiple voices and theories from the Global South and incorporate them into international debates when, as in this case, they have so much to contribute.

Decades ago, Latin American and Caribbean theories of dependency made the leap to become central to many debates on development and IR. The key in these theories was not that they were 'Latin' or 'Caribbean', but that they spoke to a universal experience of postcolonial capitalism in the Third World. In a similar vein, we hope to have demonstrated here that CCDT can help to analyse the many challenges and opportunities that the region faces in its relationship with China, and indeed to more broadly theorise the Belt and Road Initiative as a new mechanism of capitalist accumulation that remains, for the time being, unable to provide satisfactory answers to the emancipatory aspirations of the Third World.

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## Note

1. The figure is likely higher, but there is an issue of data unavailability, inaccuracy and inconsistency across databases, particularly when it comes to the smallest Caribbean countries (American Enterprise Institute 2020; Red ALC-China 2020).

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