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Bringing Economic and Political Power Back In: A Call for Re-Politicising Development Research

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Abstract: In the mainstream development debate during recent years, among others, there have been two influential camps opposing each other. The first one identifies the environmental context, the “natural” variable, as the ultimate cause that determines the socio-economic development trajectory of a society. The second influential approach argues that “the social” variable (i.e., political institutions) and not “the natural” variable is the sphere in which to look for the main explanatory variables for developmental outcomes. In this paper, we argue that although each approach has its own merits, they equally fail to address hot issues in the realm of economic development. They give an incomplete cause-and-effect picture of the ongoing, complex and vital-for-development processes, and they are equally incapable of identifying plausible explanatory variables regarding developmental successes and failures. Our aim is not to discredit the valuable body of work on either of these approaches, but instead to spark a discussion that would enable more creative, inter- and multidisciplinary research into the missing causal links between the propositions of key authors representing the aforementioned approaches and the fallacies that need to be addressed. Our position is that this is the only path that can lead to a meaningful synthesis capable of paving the way for a breakthrough in development economics and sustainable development studies.

Keywords: economic development; political institutions; environmental factors



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1. Introduction

“Why some places prosper, while others do not. How do societies climb the development ladder to greater prosperity? What is the secret sauce of economic success? Why is GDP per capita in South Korea so much higher today than it is in Cambodia, which had a similar standard of living in 1960?” (Dell 2022, p. 35). Addressing the aforementioned questions central to international organisations focusing on economic development such as the World Bank, IMF and OECD has been bothering economists for decades, if not centuries. Indeed, one of the central inquiries in economics dating back to the time of Adam Smith and other classical political economists is to understand what drives and enables the socio-economic development of particular societies, countries and regions and what hinders or restricts such development. Understanding the underlying factors of this drive is of particular relevance for development studies and economics as it largely affects policy decisions on the pathways less developed countries should take in order to unlock the power of sustainable development.

Despite the recognition of the work by Abhijit Banerjee, Esther Duflo and Michael Kremer, as demonstrated by them being awarded the Nobel Prize in economics in 2019, as well as the increased use of “Poor Economics” in university curricula in the developed world (McKenzie and Paffhausen 2018), the mainstream development debate is still dominated by two influential, yet contradictory, ideas regarding economic development. These opposing approaches have been inspired by “... sweeping, almost epic books that span centuries and continents, like *Guns, Germs, and Steel*, by Jared Diamond, which looks at environmental factors,

and *Why Nations Fail*, by Daron Acemoglu and James A. Robinson, which focuses on the role of institutions" (Dell 2022, p. 35).

Indeed, the first approach identifies “the natural” variable as the realm from which the main explanatory variables for development success or failure can be traced. Here, the ultimate determinant for the socio-economic development trajectory of a society is the environmental context, which provides the necessary resources for utilizing inventions and building societies that flourish. The much acclaimed book “*Guns, Germs, and Steel*” (Diamond 1998) is perhaps the most influential example of this. It investigates the causal links between development and nature to explain how environmental factors allowed European societies to rise to power and conquer the native people of North and South America, and not the other way around. Although this approach presents a very compelling case on the importance of environmental factors, it largely fails to assign a role for human agency, as well as to avoid the oversimplification of human–nature interactions.

A second influential approach tries to explain varying development outcomes through differing (political) institutions, i.e., “the social” variable, and not “the natural” variable, is the sphere in which to look for the main explanatory variables (Acemoglu and Robinson 2012). However, this mainstream new institutionalism, with its neoclassical influences and focus on political institutions as the ultimate cause, conceptualises “the social” variable in a rather superficial and over-simplistic way. Neither the underlying economic power structures nor the economic interests that motivate the establishment and further development of such political institutions are analysed. By contrast, it is even claimed that economic realities (such as resource distribution, economic power and economic decisions and outcomes) are determined by political institutions as the major expression of “the social” variable. Interestingly, Diamond (2012) argues that Acemoglu and Robinson build a theory relying only on the role of a single factor, namely (political) institutions, ignoring other determining variables such as geography.

In parallel to these approaches—partially because of the rising criticism on the limitations of deterministic approaches (see Berkes and Folke 1998; Berkes et al. 2008)—scholars have increasingly turned to systems of thinking and viewing the two units as parts of a complex, adaptive and interactive social-ecological system (SES). This approach, however, in spite of accepting the role of both “natural” and “social” variables (Ostrom 2007, 2009), is also prone to criticism from many sides; critical theorists argue that systems approaches depoliticise the situation that is being represented (Welsh 2014). However, key issues for development such as the nature of capital flows and globalisation processes are viewed as inevitable, and therefore, inherent conservatism is suspected (Stojanovic et al. 2016). Furthermore, weaknesses in capturing certain realms of social reality, and especially capturing integral power dynamics and competing value systems, have been identified (Stojanovic et al. 2016; Cote and Nightingale 2012). Lastly, the SES approach has been criticised for importing a naturalistic concept into the social science domain, failing to account for essential differences between the two systems (Armitage et al. 2012). It can be argued that SES scholars, in an attempt to account for “the social” (including political and economic dimensions) and “the natural” variables, actually fail to sufficiently address either of them.

This paper argues that while each approach has its own strengths, they all fall short of addressing the key issues in economic development. They provide an incomplete understanding of the cause-and-effect dynamics of ongoing processes and are inadequate in identifying the key explanatory variables for development successes and failures.

Our aim is not to discredit the valuable body of work on either of these approaches, but instead to spark a discussion that would enable more creative, inter- and multidisciplinary research into the missing causal links between the propositions of key authors representing the aforementioned approaches and the fallacies that need to be addressed. Our position is that this is the only path that can lead to a meaningful synthesis capable of paving the way for a breakthrough in sustainable development studies and economics.

The reader should be aware that offering a complete critical review on the competing approaches is neither intended nor possible in a single article. Therefore, we opt for

highlighting two representative—and very influential—books advocating “the natural” and “the social” positions, respectively. We primarily focus on the work by [Acemoglu and Robinson \(2012\)](#), as the contents and the propositions have influenced the development agendas of many international organisations, thus shaping policy and decision making regarding developmental practices. Nevertheless, we provide a brief, yet comprehensive, review of “the natural” and SES approaches, as they incorporate elements that could be considered as an “alternative” to the current prescriptions and allow a more holistic view of the topic.

We have structured the article as follows: In Section 2, we distinguish five manipulative techniques that dominate the narrative and distort the analytical steps of the two approaches. In Section 3, we provide a detailed review of “Why Nations Fail” and deconstruct, in great detail, the main propositions by the authors, providing counter-examples as evidence for these propositions. In Section 4, we re-visit “Guns, Germs, and Steel”, scrutinising the natural determinism of the author. In Section 5, we briefly highlight the insufficiencies of system thinking, such as the SES school, to holistically address the identified problems of the main two approaches. Finally, in Section 6 we draw our conclusions and propose the next steps for research.

2. Methodological Framework: Identifying the Five Manipulative Techniques in the Narratives

The crucial question is: how far do the authors propose a plausible independent variable (i.e., political institutions or the natural environment) as the major explanation for the development processes under study? In other words, the question becomes whether the “ultimate cause” lies within political institutions or nature as the starting point of the causal chain of events that will determine the outcome of a nation in terms of its development. A positive answer would imply that the main explanatory variables are indeed treated as independent ones by the authors (otherwise they could also be understood as expected outcomes and/or dependent variables in an alternative chain of events).

Referring to several case studies presented by the authors, we will show that in their narratives, they employ some or all of five manipulative techniques in order to “prove” their argument for the primacy of political institutions or nature, respectively, as the explanatory factor for the success or failure of nations (Figure 1).

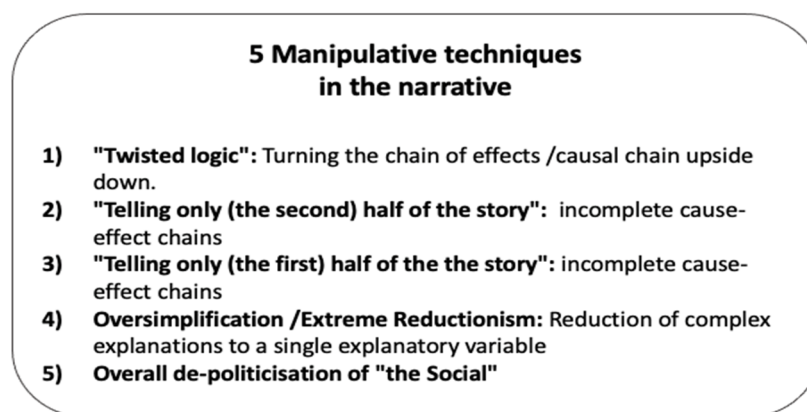


Figure 1. The five manipulative techniques in the narrative. Source: own elaboration on the basis of [Acemoglu and Robinson \(2012\)](#) and [Diamond \(1998\)](#).

It is worth noticing that the use of manipulative techniques in writing to influence the thoughts, emotions and behaviour of the reader in a deceptive or manipulative manner is not something that is particularly rare. Persuading the reader through “twisted” argumentation, emphasizing certain facts or evidence and downplaying others to support a particular viewpoint, using faulty logic or false arguments to mislead the reader into accepting a certain argument or selectively presenting information that confirms the writer’s

viewpoint and ignoring or downplaying information that contradicts it (confirmation bias) have been extensively used, even in academia. Our purpose is not to revisit the full list of logical fallacies in academic writing and assort them in the arguments presented in the selected books. Instead, we identify five overarching techniques that crosscut most—if not all—of the key claims used to support the main thesis of the authors, resulting in a completely distorted picture of economic development.

In the following text we present these five techniques, and we subsequently briefly discuss them in order to position them to the wider narrative.

(1) “Twisted logic”: Turning the causal chain upside down

The sequence of causal relationships (what is the cause and what is the effect) is presented in a way that contradicts the logic (and timing) of events. In this way, the representations offer a structure of events that suggest primacy of a single independent variable over other conditions and processes. For [Acemoglu and Robinson \(2012\)](#), for instance, political institutions dominate over (and shape) any economic conditions and processes. In the case of England’s “Glorious Revolution”, the authors argue that changes in political institutions were the starting point for all further developments. In this way, they conveniently choose to ignore primarily economic (and only secondarily political) emancipation efforts of the emerging bourgeoisie, leading to the early bourgeois revolution as a political vehicle to enable the emerging entrepreneurial classes (traders, bankers, entrepreneurial farmers and factory owners) to politically assert their economic interests against the traditional landed aristocracy associated with absolutism.

(2) “Telling only (the second) half of the story”: incomplete cause–effect chains

In the presentation of cause–effect relationships (causal chains), essential events, as well as motives of the relevant individual or collective actors, are just “faded out” or “forgotten”, usually economic events, developments or incentives. This is vital as such events may chronologically and logically precede the processes presented. To use the example of England again, [Acemoglu and Robinson \(2012\)](#) underplay the 200 years of active economic policy by the English Crown that contributed decisively to the success of the English textile industry against the competition on the European mainland (and India).

(3) “Telling only (the first) half of the story”: incomplete cause–effect chains

In the presentation of historical facts, important events and developments are “hidden” although they are chronologically and logically subsequent to the processes discussed. These historical facts would contradict the logic of effects propagated by the authors, namely political institutions or nature determine the success of economic development or the economic failure of the societies concerned, i.e., they would prove something different from what the authors suggest as the outcome of the main explanatory variable chosen. For example, the massive increase in the political and economic power in Venice after 1380 strongly contradicts [Acemoglu and Robinson’s \(2012\)](#) thesis of a massive economic decline of the city, so they choose to wrap up their story in the short period following 1330.

(4) Oversimplification: Reduction of complex explanations to a single explanatory variable

Both approaches systematically ignore or fade out other (very) important explanatory variables, the inclusion of which would better explain the complex events under study, but would contradict the main thesis of a single independent variable explaining everything.

Although this is a common feature in both theses we explore, it is particularly evident in [Diamond’s \(1998\)](#) line of argument: Spain indeed had a clear head start in terms of environmental conditions to initiate a chain of events ultimately allowing the Spaniards to conquer the Incan empire and preventing the opposite from happening. Yet, Persia, Greece and Egypt also had a larger head start compared to that of Spain and were without any of the (environmental) limitations the Incas had. Yet, they never crossed the ocean. Diamond conveniently chooses to systematically ignore such “paradoxes”.

(5) Overall de-politicisation of “the social”

Perhaps paradoxically, the processes cited by the authors with regard to their explanatory variable are presented in such a way that they appear to be completely unaffected by

economic power relations, goals and motivations (although, in the eyes of the authors, these are dependent on the political institutions or nature, respectively). Changes in political institutions (allegedly) are focused on by the actors for their own sake, i.e., for purely political, ethical or religious reasons, and are not in connection with economic goals or economic power aspirations. Similarly, environmental conditions shape human behaviour to the point that they strip the agency from any social actors. The result in both cases is a conceptualisation of “the social” variable in a completely de-politicised, and thus superficial, distorted and misleading, way.

Referring to two particularly impressive “cases” from [Acemoglu and Robinson \(2012\)](#) as examples, we will now show how they employ the five manipulative techniques in order to support their simple explanatory pattern that “political institutions” always causally determine economic conditions and processes. Our message is a somewhat more complex and differentiated—or less manipulative—presentation of the respective historical events, suggesting a different interpretation regarding cause–effect relationships, and thus, leads to very different conclusions. More precisely, we can even use the same cases to argue the exact opposite of what the authors claim: in the cases discussed, the economic conditions, processes and motives of the actors have led to the modification of political institutions (which in turn affected the economic institutions).

3. Why ‘Why Nations Fail’ Fails

“*Why Nations Fail: The Origins of Power, Prosperity, and Poverty*” (2012) by Acemoglu and Robinson¹ illustrates how wrong and ideologically driven assumptions and a rather superficial analysis based on a preconceived view of what drives human development may lead to a complete misconception regarding cause-and-effect relationships. In the following, we present and deconstruct the propositions by the authors.

3.1. Two Pairs of Opposites and Confusion Regarding Cause-and-Effect Relationships

The authors use two pairs of opposites in their account of why some countries are “poor” and others are “rich”. An explicit distinction is made between the so-called “exclusive” and “inclusive” institutions—exclusive institutions block and inclusive institutions support economic and social development. Much less explicitly (rather implicitly), however, the two authors work with a different pair of opposites: economic versus political explanatory variables (in their terminology, these are “economic institutions” versus “political institutions”).

The picture that the two authors draw of various “case studies” regarding cause-and-effect relationships explaining socioeconomic development processes (or the restriction and prevention thereof) can be summarised the following way: it is claimed that a political variable, usually a political institution (or changes in one or more political institutions), is at the beginning of a causal chain, which via a series of further mediating variables, determines the economic development paths of the society or region under consideration. The authors embed this position in a pleasing narrative structure, arguing that these political institutions produce “power”, “prosperity” or “poverty”. The secondary variables can be economic, natural (in the sense of the natural environment) or social (i.e., political, but also cultural or religious).

We will attempt to illustrate their argument in a following way:

The main explanatory variable A (something political, i.e., a political institution or the change thereof) => B, C, D, etc., (leads to something else²) => Z (and B, C, and D, etc., finally lead to Z, that is, development success or failure as the final outcome, i.e., Z+ or Z-).

In short, we can represent the claim of the authors in the following way:

Political A => B => C => D => ... => Z+ (or Z-)

This creates an impression that it is (almost) always “inclusive” political institutions that are decisive elements of development success, and “exclusive” political institutions decide the failure of “nations”. “It is the political process that determines what economic

institutions people live under, and it is the political institutions that determine how this process works" (Acemoglu and Robinson 2012, p. 42).

Especially with the case studies, the authors sometimes use only the much less clear-cut term of "inclusive" or "exclusive" institutions (i.e., without an indication of whether they are political or economic ones). In any case, the absolute primacy of "the political" over "the economic" ones is suggested. This means that the inclusive institutions that promote development in the case studies are usually inclusive political institutions, which when this statement is repeated over 462 pages, inevitably gives the reader the impression of a clear primacy of political structures and processes over economic realities. At some points, however, the authors also express their views on this very clearly: "This book will show that while economic institutions are critical for determining whether a country is poor or prosperous, it is politics and political institutions that determine what economic institutions a country has." (ibid., p. 43).

To acquire a basic understanding of "Why Nations Fail", we must explicitly turn the Ricardian–Marxian superstructure/structure pattern upside down, i.e., the Ricardian–Marxian understanding of the relationship between the political institutional superstructure and the economic basis of a society with a principled primacy of economic conditions, structures and processes.

For Acemoglu and Robinson, "it is the political institutions of a nation that determine the ability of citizens to control politicians and influence how they behave. This in turn determines whether politicians are agents of the citizens, albeit imperfect, or are able to abuse the power entrusted to them, or that they have usurped, to amass their own fortunes and to pursue their own agendas, ones detrimental to those of the citizens." (ibid., p. 42) It remains unclear what motivates the actors who initially established these political institutions, which for the authors are the key to understanding world history and the core of their "theory for world inequality" (ibid., p. 43). However, this representation of development does provoke some doubts, even if we exclusively focus on the facts presented in the writing of the authors.

In other words, even if only based on the work of Acemoglu and Robinson (2012), the story can be told in a different way:

X (something economic) => A (the political—not any more independent—variable that is *their* starting point) => B, C, D, etc., (other variables in the logical/causal chain) => Z (the final outcome in form of development success or failure, Z+ or Z–, respectively)

In short, based on the authors' arguments, we may very well reformulate the main chain of events in the following way:

Economic X => Political A => B => C => D => Z

In the following subsections, we briefly present the two main cases used by Acemoglu and Robinson (2012) and illustrate how the five manipulative techniques have been utilised to eliminate the economic, X, variable (as well as other plausible explanatory variables) in order to support their claim on the supremacy of the political variable.

3.2. The Two Cases

3.2.1. The Events Culminating in the "Glorious Revolution" in England

The message in Acemoglu and Robinson's (2012) account of the events surrounding the Glorious Revolution is very simple and clear: changes in political institutions are the starting point for all further developments, including changes in economic institutions, which ultimately made the Industrial Revolution possible. Thus, political institutions are "the origins of power, prosperity" in Britain, while economic conditions and processes are only the result of previous developments of political institutions: "England was unique among nations when it made the breakthrough to sustained economic growth in the seventeenth century. Major economic changes were preceded by a political revolution that brought a distinct set of economic and political institutions, much more inclusive than those of any previous society" (ibid., p. 102). "The Industrial Revolution started and made its biggest strides in England because of her uniquely inclusive economic institutions.

These in turn were built on foundations laid by the inclusive political institutions brought about by the Glorious Revolution." (ibid., p. 208). According to the authors it is clear that these economic institutions are the outcome of inclusive political institutions: "The technological advances, the drive of businesses to expand and invest, and the efficient use of skills and talent were all made possible by the inclusive economic institutions that England developed. These in turn were founded on her inclusive political institutions." (ibid., p. 104).

On the pages following this quotation, however, Acemoglu and Robinson (2012) provide, with impressive nonchalance, proof of these fallacious (or oversimplistic) assertions, one after another. After introducing the second case, we summarise them according to the five manipulative techniques utilised to guide the reader to specific conclusions and exclude possible alternative conclusions.

3.2.2. How Venice Became a Museum

In their case study on the importance of political institutions in the (alleged) economic decline of the Republic of Venice, in its heyday, it was the richest of the pre- or early capitalist Italian city-states, Acemoglu and Robinson (2012) focus on a process known in the literature as "la serrata" ("the closure"). According to the authors, this transformation of the political institutions of the Republic initiated in 1286, or at the latest in 1297, (and completed with its economic institutional effects in around 1330) ended the historical, centuries-long development of Venice and ended it, i.e., caused the economic decline of the Republic.

The wealth of Venice was mainly based on long-distance maritime trade with countries in the East. An innovative economic institution was the "commenda" or "colleganza". In the commenda, two merchants would invest in a unique trading venture (i.e., shipping for the purchase and sale of goods in long-distance maritime trade). One of them would contribute a major part of the capital and remain in Venice (where they could continue with other business). The second partner would invest an (often much) smaller share of the capital, but accompanied the voyage, and thus the goods or their handling (Lane 1973, p. 52). In the case of the colleganza, the same approach applied to companies with more than two partners. This type of temporary "public limited company" established for a one-off venture facilitated considerable upward social mobility, particularly for young, entrepreneurially talented men from less well-off families.

For Acemoglu and Robinson (2012), the existence of the commenda/colleganza apparently explains a large part of the economic development of Venice. By the same token, they blame the abolition of this institution in around 1330—an essential step towards the monopolisation of long-distance maritime trade by the higher nobility implemented after prior changes in the political institutions between 1286 and 1315—for the alleged economic and political decline of the Republic shortly thereafter. "Long-distance trade became the preserve of the nobility. This was the beginning of the end of Venetian prosperity. . . . and Venice began to experience economic decline." (ibid., p. 156). In short, political institutions changed, this negatively affected economic institutions, and the result was economic decline: "Venice went from economic powerhouse to museum." (ibid., p. 156). However, this account of events is distorted by the five manipulative techniques in a very similar way to those used in the case of England.

3.3. The Five Manipulative Techniques in the Cases of England and Venice

3.3.1. "Twisted Logic": Turning the Causal Chain Upside Down

England:

This technique is utilised to explain why the political institutions in England in comparison, e.g., to France and Spain were "on their way to much greater pluralism" (ibid., p. 105). The authors cite two political realities: the already existing political institutions, such as a centralised state, and "a broad and powerful coalition able to place durable constraints on the power of the monarchy" (ibid., p. 104).

However, why were the members of this coalition in England willing and able to place permanent constraints on the monarchy as opposed to those in Spain or France?

This is where the reader is provided with a record of the economic causes of the political institutional developments, which, as [Acemoglu and Robinson \(2012\)](#) argue, are the primary explanatory variable. When one is discussing the balance of power between Parliament and the Crown, it turns out that the degree of financial independence of the absolutist rulers in relation to other actors in society—specifically, to the rising class of the new agricultural, commercial or manufacturing entrepreneurs, that is, the rising class of the bourgeoisie—makes the difference: “. . . [A]fter 1492 the Spanish Crown had a vast American empire and benefited massively from the gold and silver found there. In England the situation was different. Elizabeth I was far less financially independent, so she had to beg Parliament for more taxes. In exchange, Parliament demanded concessions, in particular restrictions on the right of Elizabeth to create monopolies” (ibid., p. 105), which is damaging to the economic interest of the ascending bourgeoisie. Additionally, further: “It was a conflict Parliament gradually won. In Spain, the Cortes lost a similar conflict. Trade wasn’t just monopolized; it was monopolized by the Spanish monarchy” (ibid., p. 105). “Elizabeth I and her successors could not monopolize the trade with the Americas. Other European monarchs could. So while in England, Atlantic trade and colonization started creating a large group of wealthy traders with few links to the Crown, this was not the case in Spain or France. The English traders resented royal control and demanded changes in political institutions and the restriction of royal prerogatives. They played a critical role in the English Civil War and the Glorious Revolution. . . . The difference was that in England it was far more likely that the opponents to absolutism would prevail because they were relatively wealthy and more numerous than the opponents to absolutism in Spain and France.” (ibid., p. 106). “So the expanding trade opportunities presented by the Americas, the mass entry of English merchants into this trade and the economic development of the colonies, and the fortunes they made in the process, tipped the balance of power in the struggle between the monarchy and those opposed to absolutism” (ibid., p. 210).

After all, the economic resources and resulting independence of the rising bourgeoisie, together with their clearly defined economic interests and goals, explain the subsequent political institutional changes in England that paved the way for the Industrial Revolution. Again, economic causes of the processes depicted are visible as the primary explanations, which is exactly opposite to what [Acemoglu and Robinson \(2012\)](#) consistently claim.

However, the authors still misinterpret the core message of their own empirical account, as they ask in heart-warming naivety: “Why was the balance of power between Crown and Parliament different in England than in France and Spain?” (ibid., p. 108).

An alternative interpretation that addresses this question could be that it was the economic motivations of the rising bourgeoisie, rather than political considerations, which were the primary driving force behind the “Glorious Revolution.” This early bourgeoisie revolution allowed the emerging entrepreneurial class, made up of traders, bankers, farmers and factory owners, to assert their economic interests against the monarchy and the traditional, land-owning aristocracy, which was tied to feudalism and absolutism. The bourgeois democratic revolution served as a political means for these emerging classes to gain power and advance their economic goals. It is the same story in England in the 17th century as that in the Netherlands in the 16th century and in France in the late 18th century.

Venice:

The same twisted logic is utilised by Acemoglu and Robinson to analyse the case of Venice. The authors admit that the economic social upward mobility through the commenda threatened “to reduce the profits and economic success of established elites. And they did not just reduce their profits; they also challenged their political power” (ibid., p. 54f.). In order to protect their economic opportunities (and later, explicit economic privileges) in the long term, the economically wealthiest (and therefore, politically most powerful) noble families began a process of gradually dismantling a number of democratic rights of participation. This finally led to a hereditary monopoly of power of the Venetian high

nobility, which was secured by a secret service and a police apparatus. By instrumentalising their (re)gained political monopoly of power, the elite families then undertook a gradual process to oust economic competitors from long-distance trade, above all through the ban of the commenda (and the state regulation of ship tonnage in favour of merchants from the high nobility).

In other words, purely economic motivations (fear of profit reduction through new competition) led to the change in political institutions undertaken by the elites. This, in turn, led to the change in or abolishment of economic institutions threatening the economic interest of the high nobility (commenda). Contrary to the framing by [Acemoglu and Robinson \(2012\)](#), this “case study” is a clear example of a development in which economic processes and motives are the starting point (the actual explanatory variable) for the changes in political institutions, and in which the instrumentalisation of the state (i.e., the political institutions) serves the economically powerful people to further their economic interests. We see quite clearly how the monopolisation of political power (political institutions) serves to enforce economic aspirations, and not vice versa.

3.3.2. “Telling Only the First Half of the Story”: Incomplete Cause–Effect Chains

England:

As shown above, [Acemoglu and Robinson \(2012\)](#) claim that it was political motivations and the goals of the actors, as well as changes in political institutions, which explain the “power” and “prosperity” of England as a result of the Glorious Revolution and industrialisation. Nevertheless, the authors describe economic conditions, interests and objectives of the involved actors, which occurred before their political actions. The authors’ own telling of the story can therefore be utilised equally well to offer a convincing economic explanation for the developments under study: “...because it was there [in England] that the feudal order had made way most comprehensively for commercially minded farmers and independent urban centres where merchants and industrialists could flourish. These groups were already demanding more secure property rights, different economic institutions, and political voice from their monarchs. This whole process would come to a head in the seventeenth century.” (ibid., p. 181).

The logical context of the events before, during and after the Glorious Revolution can be summarised as follows: the new, emerging class of the commercial and manufacturing bourgeoisie experienced the economic and political realities given in English absolutism (monopolies, taxation, arbitrary and unlimited legislation by the Crown) as an obstacle to their own economic development. In order to be able to push through changes that are in line with their economic interests, the industrial bourgeoisie became politically involved, with the central event being the Glorious Revolution.

After the end of English or British absolutism, the bourgeoisie, in association with commercially oriented farmers, immediately set about instrumentalising the newly gained political power (parliament, courts and taxation laws) for their economic (class) interests. This same instrumentalisation of the state by the rising bourgeoisie to achieve their economic interests took place in the field of foreign policy or foreign economic policy. “After 1688, though domestically a level playing field emerged, internationally Parliament strove to tilt it. This was evident not only from the Calicoe Acts but also from the Navigation Acts, the first of which was passed in 1651, and they remained in force with alternations for the next two hundred years. The aim of these acts was to facilitate England’s monopolization of international trade—though crucially this was monopolization not by the state but by the private sector.” (ibid., pp. 201–2). All in all, this is the classic pattern of an early bourgeois democratic revolution, as it was later attempted and successfully carried out in a whole series of European countries.

3.3.3. “Telling Only the Second Half of the Story”: Incomplete Cause–Effect Chains

England:

For the period after the Glorious Revolution in 1688, i.e., the most drastic change in political institutions, Acemoglu and Robinson state: “The English state aggressively promoted mercantile activities and worked to promote domestic industry, not only by removing barriers to the expansion of industrial activity but also by lending the full power of the English navy to defend mercantile interests.” (ibid., p. 103).

However, the authors are overlooking the fact that the English Crown had been pursuing a systematic and extremely aggressive “active, selective industrial policy” for more than 200 years before the Glorious Revolution. “Edward III (1327–1377) is believed to have been the first king who deliberately tried to develop local wool cloth manufacturing. He wore only English cloth to set an example . . . , brought in Flemish weavers, centralised trade in raw wool and banned the import of woollen cloth. . . . The Tudor monarchs gave further impetus to the development of this industry with what can only be described as deliberate infant industry promotion policy” (Chang 2002, p. 19). In particular, Henry VII (1485–1509) and Elizabeth I (1558–1603) employed almost all the industrial policies and infant industry protection acts known today in order to transform England “from a country relying heavily on raw wool export to the Low Countries into the most formidable wool-manufacturing nation of the world” (Chang 2002, p. 20). This policy put England in a favourable competitive position vis à vis its European competitors such as Northern Italy, the Low Lands/Netherlands and Belgium in the textile industry (and later, in the 18th century, this included non-European competitors such as India), long before the Glorious Revolution and industrialisation. The British protectionist industrial policies continued after 1688, lasting into the 19th century (ibid., p. 22).

Venice:

Similar to the case of England, Acemoglu and Robinson (2012) choose to use only a rather limited period in the history of Venice for their analysis. In contrast to the alleged long-term decline after the political and economic “closure” (la serrata, 1297–1330), following a massive economic slump caused by the plague (1348) and the wars with Genoa (finally won in 1379/1380), in fact, Venice experienced a new economic boom. The expansion of production in the archipelago and in the mainland belonging to Venice strongly contradicts the “decline scenario” thesis of Acemoglu and Robinson. This expansion took place in the textile, silk, glass and building industries in a whole range of luxury industries (jewellery, furs, mirrors, furniture, instruments, leather goods, cloth, weapons, etc.) as well as in the still important shipbuilding industry. Even maritime trade, which in the presentation of Acemoglu and Robinson (2012) were massively damaged by the changes in economic institutions initiated by the high nobility, experienced a further upturn. A massive decline of Venice after 1330, as claimed by the authors, simply does not correspond to the historical facts.³ Rather, Venice—as an originally small and resource-poor city-state—surprisingly managed to hold its position for another 250 years against the overwhelming power of the much larger, resource-rich states of Portugal, Spain/Habsburg, Great Britain and France, as well as the Ottoman Empire.⁴

England, Venice and the limited value of Acemoglu and Robinson’s predictions:

Even if we observe the case in modern times, Veneto—the region of Italy corresponding very roughly to the Italian mainland areas controlled by the Republic of Venice—belongs to the regions of Italy with the most marked socio-economic development dynamics in the 20th century. Veneto’s increasing economic success, in particular since the 1970s, was supported by innovative regional clusters (industrial districts) that were able to transform the advantages of flexible specialisation in production technology into massive advantages regarding the region’s national and international competitiveness (Isbasoiu 2006). Even today, Venice and Veneto, compared to other Italian and European regions, are not only economically more successful than other areas are, but they also still enjoy above-average prosperity.

The difference between Venice and England, the latter one being Acemoglu/Robinson’s showcase for what “inclusive political institutions” can lead to in terms of “power” and “prosperity”, could not be stronger. While “poor” and “failing” Venice experienced economic dynamics for long after each failure, “rich” and “prosperous” England underwent

a process called “British decline” throughout the entire 20th century. While Veneto saw massive socioeconomic and technological development in the 1970s, Britain experienced the most painful phases of its economic downfall ever. Acemoglu and Robinson’s “theory for world inequality” (2012, p. 43), apart from a limited explanatory value, seems to have considerable deficits regarding its predictive power too.

3.3.4. Oversimplification: Reduction of Complex Explanations to a Single Explanatory Variable

It is true that Venice experienced temporary economic crises in the period from 1330 to the 17th century. Historians explain these difficulties with a whole number of events that very well highlight the complexity of the case and the interplay of the multitude of factors contributing to the temporary troubles (albeit, not a permanent decline) of Venice between 1330 and the 17th century. Major sources of economic problems had been various plague “waves” from 1348 onwards, military confrontations with Genoa and the incessant wars with the Ottoman Empire leading to the loss of its colonies and its supremacy in the Adriatic. Further, Spaniards, the Portuguese and the Genoese states—as well as later the Dutch and English states—broke the centuries-old monopoly that Venice had on trade with countries in the East. The wars against rival Milan brought Venice to the limit of its economic capacity in the 15th century, and Milan’s hostile monetary policy threatened to plunge the Venetian coinage system into complete chaos (Alaoui et al. 2007, p. 44; Tracy 1990; Lane 1973; Necipoğlu 2009; Dursteler 2006). Nevertheless, despite all the difficulties, Venice probably enjoyed the greatest prosperity at the end of the 15th century.

Something such as a permanent economic decline of Venice only began in the phase from 1700 to 1800, that is, four hundred years after “la serrata” (the closure), which Acemoglu and Robinson (2012) describe causally. The reasons for this decline include the protectionist policies of the larger European territorial states, the stagnation of the Mediterranean region as a whole due to rampant piracy, credit shortages resulting from the lack of financial innovation in Venice, wars with the great powers of France, Spain and the German Empire, overwhelming Ottoman competition and the plague in the 1630s with almost 50,000 casualties (more than a third of the population), as well as the rivalry with other Italian powers and their hostile economic policies vis à vis Venice.⁵ It should be pointed out here that in the mid-17th century, the Netherlands (as another relatively small country and small economy compared with major powers such as Great Britain, Spain, France, Habsburg, etc.) also increasingly suffered from greater declining importance compared with those of its larger European competitors, without there being any events such the economic “closure” in Venice.⁶

3.3.5. Overall De-Politicisation of “the Social” Variable

Acemoglu/Robinson’s “political institutions” appear to be completely detached from any internal or external economic interest or power relations. This implies that, in their narrative, the change in existing or the creation of new political institutions are not at all inspired by any economic objectives, but instead by independent political, ethical or cultural motivations. However, in order to analyse and explain political institutions, economic interests and power (as well as other contributing factors) need to be taken into account.

Acemoglu and Robinson (2012) argue: “World inequality dramatically increased with the British, or English, Industrial Revolution because only some parts of the world adopted the innovations and new technologies that men such as Arkwright and Watt, and the many who followed, developed. The response of different nations to this wave of technologies, which determined whether they would languish in poverty or achieve sustained economic growth, was largely shaped by the different historical paths of their institutions.” (ibid., p. 105). This statement of the authors is an incredible, almost impudent distortion of the facts. It strongly implies that “only some parts of the world” undertook efforts to adopt these innovations and new technologies, while the others, for some inexplicable reason, were just not interested. However, after more than five centuries of colonial and

neo-colonial oppression and exploitation of large parts of the world, it should be clear what shaped the “different historical paths of their institutions”, according to Acemoglu and Robinson, as a result produced “failed” nations that “languish in poverty” (ibid., p. 105).

To stay within the terminology of Acemoglu and Robinson (2012), it was the colonial powers, in particular England/Great Britain, celebrated by the authors for its “inclusive” political and economic institutions, that installed all kinds of anti-developmental “exclusive” political and economic institutions in the areas they dominated or maintained and strengthened existing ones. Examples include the plantation economies based on slave labour in North, South and Central America and the Caribbean, the introduction by colonisers of hitherto unknown elites into African societies (at the time, non-existent “tribal chiefs”, “kings” or “nobles”) from the 17th to 19th centuries and other colonial institutions leading to the “exclusion” or outright destruction of human potential and resources of all kinds over several centuries, including the establishment or approval of apartheid systems. Further, strategies such as the conscious de-industrialisation of India by the English colonial powers or bans on industrial activities in New England colonies, all sorts of protectionism in trade, as well as the prevention of “technology outflows”, including export bans (and in some cases even bans on the departure of people with technical knowledge, etc.) by Britain to actively block catch-up industrialisation in various other European countries were anything but “inclusive” (Chang 2002, pp. 64–65; Oto-Peralias and Romero-Avila 2017; Thorner and Thorner and Thorner 1962). Moreover, these examples include support from those in countries in “the West” of coups and military dictatorships in developing countries (as well as in rather developed countries such as Turkey and Greece) and of all kinds of regimes that were extremely repressive (“exclusive”) in political and economic terms in the second half of the 20th century. As far as the external conditions of development and underdevelopment are concerned, even larger parts of the international or global institutions of today (e.g., WTO rules, bilateral and multilateral economic agreements), which were established and shaped mainly by countries in the West, act as development-inhibiting, “exclusive” institutions.

3.3.6. Further Fallacies and a Different Interpretation

As we have seen so far, while the work of Acemoglu and Robinson provides a compelling narrative, it is not without major flaws and fallacies. The authors present a strong correlation between inclusive institutions and economic success, but a correlation does not necessarily imply causality. There could be numerous other underlying factors that contribute to the observed relationship. Additionally, the authors sometimes rely on anecdotal evidence to support their argument, which can be misleading.

Indeed, a more profound critique of Acemoglu and Robinson’s approach could entirely focus on the shaky methodological foundations of many of their claims. For example, in the study by Acemoglu and Robinson, there is only some reasoning for potential “drivers” or “triggers” explaining the development of “inclusive” or “extractive” institutions in the societies under study. However, in a previous paper, the authors found that different rates of settler mortality in the former European colonies centuries ago were the instrumental prerequisite for the emergence of “inclusive institutions” in some countries and “extractive institutions” in others, with the respective effect on economic development such as that observed at the end of the 20th century (Acemoglu et al. 2001). The authors present the correlation between settler mortality and the ex-colonies’ growth performance—linked through the establishment of institutions that are themselves explained by the mortality rates—as a proven cause and effect relationship. However, Margolis (2017), employing the approach of directed graphs for what he calls the “close reading” of their article, clearly shows that this is just unacceptable from a methodological point of view, however handy such an interpretation of correlation as causality may come in for their argument. According to Margolis, the major flaw of the study by Acemoglu et al. (2001) is that instead of measuring the strength of an already known (either from theory or empirical research) causal effect, the authors—based on a very selective correlation analysis—just claim the

existence of this allegedly clear-cut causal chain. At the same time, with the help of some ambiguous prose and anecdotal evidence, they rule out all other potential explanations that do not include “institutions” as the instrumental variable.

However, regardless of any methodological fallacies, if the constructed narrative supporting the primacy of the political institutions is stripped from the manipulative techniques described, the reader may arrive at a rather different interpretation of the results. In other words, the story can (and we argue it must) be told differently. Ultimately, even if other factors such as “the natural” ones are left out (we argue against it, as will be discussed in the next section), it is the economic circumstances (variables) that determine the formation and development of those political institutions, which explain (at least in part) the results presented in the cases selected by [Acemoglu and Robinson \(2012\)](#). Furthermore, it is certain conditions in the natural environment that may determine the economic activities (and the related economic institutions) of the societies concerned. Additionally, in turn, other social, and above all, political institutions, are predominantly shaped by these economic realities. So, is it “the natural” variable that determines “the economic” variable, which in turn shapes “the political”? Well, not quite, as we see in the following section.

4. Why “the Natural” Variable Might Lead to Empty Guns, Harmless Germs and Unusable Steel

In his book *“Guns, Germs, and Steel: The Fates of Human Societies”* (1998), Diamond takes a rather opposing stance compared to that of [Acemoglu and Robinson \(2012\)](#) to explain why some human societies succeeded, while others failed. He argues that the reason why some societies developed “Guns, Germs and Steel” (a catchy way to present power, society, technology and cross-cutting economic structures), which enabled them to prevail, can be reflected in the environmental differences between regions. Diamond argues that the distribution of natural resources, particularly those related to agriculture, has played a major role in shaping the development of human societies. In other words, societies with access to a wide variety of crops and animals for domestication were able to develop more advanced technologies and political systems, which in turn led to greater economic development. He does so by presenting, multiple times, the “ultimate effect” of a chain of events in order to explain (in an equally catchy phrase) “why Europeans conquered the Americas and not the other way round”.

Interestingly, the author, throughout the book, persists with his contribution against the (racist) idea of European hegemony due to inherited intellectual, moral or generic superiority. In his view, the historical, economic dominance of the West can be attributed to a variety of natural forces that are not a result of any particular virtue of Western civilization. Instead, it was due to geographical “accidents” that include features such as mountain ranges and coastlines, the availability of geological resources such as arable land, coal and gold deposits, climatological “accidents” such as the timing of ice ages and direction of ocean currents and even biological “accidents” such as the susceptibility of different populations to diseases ([Tetlock et al. 2006](#); [Popov 2014](#)). According to Diamond, these accidents of nature played a significant role in shaping the course of history.

However, during the course of developing his narrative, Diamond fell into a number of methodological and logical fallacies, often resulting in counter-intuitive and rather Eurocentric conclusions (e.g., [Blaut 1999](#)) or forming arguments that offer an excuse for centuries of colonial violence and an ideology of an imperial capitalism ([Correia 2013](#)). Consequently, and despite the different focus and entry point, in an equally successful way to [Acemoglu and Robinson \(2012\)](#), he illustrates how wrong assumptions combined with superficial analysis based on a preconceived view of what drives human development may lead to a distorted picture regarding cause-and-effect relationships.

Before we present and deconstruct the author’s key propositions, it is important to notice that in the 25 years since the book was published, there have been significant debates, updates and advances that are not fully reflected in the original editions of the *“Guns, Germs, and Steel”*. Yet, the key message of the book has had a long-lasting effect on the

field of development studies regarding the causes of economic and social development, as well as on key policy makers and donors⁷ (Landes 2015). Therefore, and contrary to the previous section, we keep our presentation and deconstruction of Diamond's narrative short. Our aim is to highlight the identical manipulative techniques employed—and their fallacies—and not to conduct a full book review.

4.1. Two Pairs of Opposites and Equal Confusion Regarding Cause-and-Effect Relationships

Diamond—very much as Acemoglu and Robinson do—uses a pair of opposites to explain why some countries ended up being “poor”, while others became “rich” and prosperous (and therefore, why the Spaniards conquered the Inca Empire). The explicit distinction here is made between the “natural” conditions and human development. Institutions (be they economic, social or political ones) will either emerge or be imported purely due to these natural conditions, which determine how human societies behave. Implicitly, however, the reader might conclude that Diamond argues in this linear chain of events that some human societies just made better use than others did of the equal advantages provided by nature. The British subdued the North American indigenous people, while the Spaniards subdued their South American counterparts. However, they also subdued those in North Africa and the Middle East, despite the “head start” that the latter group received. The reasoning why such differentiation occurs within the same regional unit of analysis is left to the reader, possibly with unintended consequences. We can easily imagine a reader carefully studying 400 pages of the book, only to conclude a statement such as: “Well, Eurasian people are not smarter than the Aborigine people in Australia are, they were just more privileged in terms of their natural environment. However, Egyptian people, on the other hand, were more privileged than the British people were. Yet, the British people subdued both the Egyptian and Aborigine people, so they are definitely smarter than the Egyptians are.”

This is not of course an accusation against Diamond of racism. On the contrary, he is adamant about his anti-racist position. However, his approach entails the same risk that Charles Darwin unwittingly posed to humanity with “*The Origin of Species*” and his theory of evolution and natural selection, unintentionally contributing to the development of Social Darwinism.

In order to explain the socioeconomic development processes (or the restriction and prevention thereof), Diamond refers to various “case studies” to discuss cause-and-effect relationships (the causal chains), often in painful detail and supported with mountains of evidence. The argument can be summarised as follows: The natural availability of plants and animals for domestication led to more food and larger populations in Europe and Asia. This enabled these societies to develop agriculture (availability of species for domestication), and in turn resulted in a boom in technology and innovation (large populations able to accommodate craftsmen, scholars, bureaucrats and statesmen), as well as complex social structures and governments that caused a constant cycle of development (and of the conquest and replacement of less technologically focused populations). The process is subject to three more variables: (i) the rate of diffusion of agriculture, technology and innovation due to the geographic orientation of Europe and Asia (east–west) compared to those of the American continents (North–South); (ii) the ease of intercontinental diffusion between Europe, Asia and Africa due to topography; (iii) the differences in continental size, with all this finally leading to amplified differences in total population size and technological diffusion. This would explain why certain societies in the American continents, for example, were eventually left behind although they had a similarly strong head start to that of their Eurasian counterparts. Overall, the processes culminated in a situation where Eurasian people had access to guns, germs and steel, which allowed them to gain a prominent role in the world.

Diamond's argument can be illustrated in the following way:

Main explanatory variable A (something natural, e.g., availability of a species) => B, C, D, . . . (leads to political, social and economic development with differentiated success

on the basis of conditions (i), (ii) and (iii), which are also natural, e.g., topography) => Z (finally leads to Z, which is development success or failure as the final outcome, manifested with the example of Eurasian people conquered others).

Alternatively, in short:

Natural A under conditions i, ii and iii => B^{i,ii,iii}, C^{i,ii,iii}, D^{i,ii,iii} . . . => Z (Z+ or Z-)

The whole argument boils down to the fact that it is (almost) always “the natural” variable that is the decisive element for development success and any failures in the political, social or economic spheres, including technological, ideological or military failures.

Interestingly, however, Diamond, in the later editions of his seminal book, brings into play the institutional variable “Y” and even devotes a full chapter to explaining why certain giants such as China failed to attain the expected outcome. In this case, the institutional Y (i.e., political circumstances such as China rejecting exploration aspirations) is the final explanation: China failed because political institutions prevented those in the country from conquering the American continents.

When Y comes into play, the sequence of events, according to [Diamond \(1998\)](#), becomes as follows:

Political Y => economic X => failure to exploit (natural) A => B, C, D . . . => dev’ result Z-

In such cases, however, Diamond, despite his efforts, largely replicates the argument of [Acemoglu and Robinson \(2012\)](#) on the primacy of political institutions over everything else.

4.2. The Five Manipulative Techniques in Diamond’s Narrative

So, the key question now becomes: how much can we claim that the “natural” variable A is the major explanatory variable for the observed outcomes in the cases provided by Diamond? Our position is that “the natural” variable only partially explains the outcomes, while the economic variable, in many cases, is the real starting point of the causal chain, at least regarding the described outcome. We will show this with regard to two of Diamond’s case studies, China’s “failure” to conquer the American continents and the events surrounding England’s Glorious Revolution, thus leading to “success”. In those cases, Diamond uses manipulative techniques that are very similar, if not identical to those of [Acemoglu and Robinson \(2012\)](#) in order to convey his message of the primacy of “the natural” variable as the explanatory factor for the success or failure of nations.

4.2.1. “Twisted Logic”: Turning the Chain of Effects/Causal Chain Upside Down

The sequence of causal relationships as presented by [Diamond \(1998\)](#) largely contradicts the logic and timing of the events in a very similar way to that of [Acemoglu and Robinson \(2012\)](#). Diamond suggests the primacy of natural factors over social ones (political institutions and economic conditions and processes) by providing interesting examples: England conquered the American continents because there was a glorious revolution, because England was unified earlier, because of natural conditions (i), (ii) and (iii), because it developed agriculture earlier and because there were more domesticated species accessible. However, this chain of events was common in many other Eurasian countries, actually, a millennia earlier than it occurred in England. Yet, it was England that prevailed and not Egypt, Greece or Italy (truth be told, neither Zambia nor Ghana were used by Diamond to illustrate his point).

4.2.2. “Telling Only (the Second) Half of the Story”: Incomplete Cause–Effect Chains

The core of this technique is that essential events or motives of relevant individual or collective actors—usually economic developments and incentives—are “faded out” or “forgotten” despite the fact that they chronologically and logically precede the processes presented. As we discussed in the previous section, 200 years of active economic policy introduced by the English Crown decisively contributed to the success of the English textile industry during competition with other nations, for instance. Similarly in [Diamond’s \(1998\)](#)

case study, the reader sees that England ended up conquering the American continents, but he does not give an explanation for how England reached a point at which the conquering of America by the English people was possible, rather than by the Egyptian people for instance (who are more privileged in terms of natural causes).

4.2.3. “Telling Only (the First Half) Half of the Story”: Incomplete Cause–effect Chains

In this part of the narrative, Diamond discusses, in painstaking detail, why Egyptian people and those in countries in the Fertile Crescent reached a status of more unprecedented prosperity compared to those of the Aborigine and Sub-Saharan African people, but we are not informed about what happened next. How and why those countries lost the race to others, ending up often equally as underdeveloped as nations and rather underprivileged in terms of environmental resources, is not explained.

4.2.4. Oversimplification: Reduction of Complex Explanations to a Single Explanatory Variable

With his exclusive focus on “the natural” variable as the ultimate variable explaining the “history of everybody for the last 13,000 years”, [Diamond \(1998\)](#) falls into the most common pitfall that he accuses economists and any other scholar of: attempting to explain a complex system by “taking a single factor that does explain parts of the results and claiming that explains all the results” (*ibid.*, p. 436). It is ironic that Diamond has been heavily criticised by other scholars for a very similar fallacy: environmental reductionism, and most notably, for reviving the theory of environmental determinism (see for example [Blaut 1999; 2000; Sluyter 2003; Hong 2010](#)). Therefore, we will not focus more on this rather sufficiently criticised manipulative technique.

4.2.5. Overall De-Politicisation of “the Natural” Variable

Similar to [Acemoglu and Robinson \(2012\)](#), the processes described by [Diamond \(1998\)](#) are presented in such a way that the natural variables appear to affect either economic power relations or goals and motivations, while being themselves completely unaffected/uninfluenced. There is evidence beyond dispute though that practices such as agriculture and domestication drastically transform “the natural” environment. It is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss this aspect; however, it needs to be mentioned that, perhaps paradoxically, Diamond refers to several examples of species being hunted to the point of extinction, and, therefore, humans lost the opportunity to domesticate them. Yet, again, he fails to explain why the European people chose to domesticate their own species and later exterminate species they met in Australia, Africa or the American continents.

“The natural” variable, since the dawn of civilisation, has been an arena that has interacted with “the social” variable. Colonialism ensured a huge transfer of resources from one continent to another, directly impacting the chances of the conquered people developing. Similarly, humans, and this applies especially to those living on islands, devised those institutional mechanisms that would allow them to make best use of their limited natural resources, regardless of their availability. Such decisions influence the natural landscape and, in turn, impact the social landscape. Therefore, we have the “paradox” of islands with very limited resources developing extremely effective (political and economic) institutions, thereby allowing them to successfully deal with the natural constraints and to play an important role in certain historical periods (e.g., Crete and the Aegean Islands especially in terms of trade, agricultural practices and governance), while others, despite them having a much more privileged starting position (head start), fail to use them (the Easter Island paradigm). It is, hereby, rather evident that in the work by [Diamond \(1998\)](#), human agency, social interaction and even ingenuity are reduced to mere random incidents due to natural privileges or/and constraints.

4.2.6. European People Conquering the American continents and Methodological Fallacies: Where Is Human Agency?

The notion of “European people”, which is consistently used throughout the book by [Diamond \(1998\)](#), is extremely vague. Several European nations, indeed, conquered parts of the world. However, not all of them did.. Not even the majority of them did. Instead, a handful of those were mostly disadvantaged (did not have a “head start” according to the author). This becomes even more problematic as Diamond considers Eurasia as one unit for his analysis. If we also include the fact that he considers North Africa as a region that should be included in the Eurasian unit, then the whole argument loses its meaning. In this case, we are talking about a vast region representing nearly 50% of the world’s land mass resulting in subduing the rest of the globe. Yet, not a single nation from those having had a head start became a major player; those in the Egypt, Persia, Greece, Italy and the Arabian countries never managed to cross the oceans (symbolism used to illustrate a country reaching a level of development, allowing it to commit vast resources and become a world power). Instead, some of the most handicapped ones such as Britain (being also an island, so additionally problematic according to the author) did so. Basically, if we were to skip the whole analysis and jump to the results, even if we were to select randomly a country that would discover America, we would have most likely chosen one from Eurasia and North Africa (around 50% probability to be precise).

The real question is: why did Britain, France, Netherlands, Spain and Portugal succeed and not Persia, Morocco, Egypt, Turkey or Greece, despite having a clear head start? Actually, those countries are only from a small part of Europe (West) and not from the remaining 95% of Eurasia and North Africa (in this case, our random selection of a country experiment would rather fail to pick any of these five European powers). The argument stands as long as we compare Eurasia and North Africa with North and South America, Oceania and Sub-Saharan Africa, including all the specificities (horizontal versus vertical axes, more species to be domesticated, etc.). However, if we try to generalise the same analytical principles and apply them to only half the world (Eurasia and North Africa), then it fails to explain the strikingly different development pathways. The author (*ibid*) provides us with one possible reason as to why using the example of China.

In China, there had been political processes that failed to support economic structures, which could have harnessed the huge potential of the country due to its natural advantages. So, in other words, in China, the chain of events was rather different compared, for instance, to those in England.

Political Y => Economic X => failure to take advantage of A => B, C, D
=> Outcome Z–: The Chinese people did not discover America

So, actually, in the case presented, [Diamond \(1998\)](#) fully embraces [Acemoglu and Robinson \(2012\)](#) in their proposition of the primacy of political institutions, with the only difference that for [Diamond \(1998\)](#), China is presented as the exception, rather than the rule.

By extrapolating, however, from this plausible causal link drawn for China, we can answer, in the same way, why it was not Egypt that conquered America. However, here we need to add a twist to the story. Sixteenth century Egypt was part of an Empire that was politically and economically dependent on the Ottomans. As a result, the Glorious Revolution in Britain would not have occurred in Egypt, not because of constraints posed by nature (such as the very inaccurate example provided by Diamond when he rhetorically asked if the Glorious Revolution could have happened in Zambia (p. 443)), but because the economic interests of the Egyptian upper class perfectly coincided with those of the Ottoman Empire. Therefore, political institutions formed on the basis of economic interests ensured the continuation of the status quo (which remained largely unchallenged for the following 300 years). This argument may hold if you compare selected localities from 50% of the globe to others from the other 50%. However, when it is applied within the same (huge) region, it becomes particularly problematic. To illustrate this, we can paraphrase the exact argument given by [Diamond \(1998\)](#), but adjust it to fit an Egyptian instead of a

Zambian context (text in italics indicated changes made to the original text), thus making the quote non-sensical:

“Egypt couldn’t have experienced a glorious revolution in 1688, because of obvious ultimate causes resulting in its not having any king to overthrow, nor any parliament to increase its power. That was not because agriculture arrived in Britain around 5500 years ago but in Egypt 8–10,000 years ago. Most of modern Britain’s area became politically unified under the Roman Empire around 80 A.D; Modern Egypt’s area did become unified under the first dynasty around 3000 BC. Britain had its own Kings by about A.D 600 and a parliament around A.D 1300; Egypt had its own Kings thousands of years earlier. Egypt does not suffer from low agricultural productivity because of its fertile grounds and Mediterranean climate.” (pp. 443–44).

We can now see that this line of argument can go on and on, but instead of supporting the thesis, it actually discredits any of the advantages of Britain over Egypt, with the exception perhaps of Britain being an island, which is, rather, an exception as Diamond elaborates. A very similar logic can be followed for Italy and Greece, where even the advantage of having an “early parliament” is nullified. Similarly, Iran or India could have been the most likely candidates for a break-through. Yet, they were not. Why?

If we accept Diamond’s argument on the ultimate causes of geography and the proximate causes of the social variable (in his example, the Glorious Revolution), we would have experienced several glorious revolutions across Eurasia and not necessarily in Britain (unless the actual ultimate cause is to be an island nation, which then would not explain France’s rise to power). All those candidate countries did have serious advantages over Britain. Yet, they all failed not only to conquer the new world, but also to become dominant powers during recent centuries. Why?

As discussed in detail in the previous section, we claim that it was the economic structures that unleashed or blocked political processes and institutions that would have allowed a glorious revolution to occur. This is not to say that the argument of “Britain over Zambia” does not hold, nor to argue that nature does not play any role.

The author further argues that islands are generally in a handicapped position due to natural constraints in terms of diffusion, topography and size. Britain is an (yet another) exception of an island nation rising into power. The main reasoning is the proximity to mainland Europe where all the action was taking place. Diamond (1998), in order to support his argument, compares Britain to Australia (even bigger, but isolated) and small islands in the Pacific (which may not be isolated, yet they are too small). However, yet again, Diamond (1998) fails to compare the exemplified case of Britain with localities within the Eurasia and North Africa regions. He does not compare, for instance, and fails to explain why small islands such as Crete or Cyprus received a huge head start compared to those of mainland Asia Minor or Greece or why it was Britain and not Sumatra—an island that is larger and equally close to a mainland—that conquered the American continents. Lastly, the interesting case of Japan is only briefly discussed and underplayed, hinting at the explanation that it was the economic and political institutions that failed to take advantage of natural resources.

In this frame, the deterministic approach utilised by Diamond, combined with a lack of human agency becomes a major weakness in the narrative and has, indeed, been heavily criticised. For example, Wilcox (2010) as well as Correia (2013) argues that Diamond tends to obscure the role of colonialism and imperialism in shaping the global distribution of wealth and power and that his approach tends to present a deterministic view of history that ignores the agency of individuals and communities. Similarly, others criticise the downplayed role of human agency and cultural adaptation and the failures of a deterministic view of history that ignores the complex and multifaceted nature of human societies (Blaut 1999; Rushton 1999; Mokyr 2002; Mann 2006).

All in all, while environmental factors play a vital role in the development of societies, it is ultimately the choices and actions of individuals and groups that shape the course of history. Additionally, such choices are always motivated by the economic interests of

individuals, as well as communities and whole societies, and the economic structures in which the production and distribution of goods and services are organised to serve such interests.

5. Discussion: Is It “the Political” Variable or “the Natural” Variable That Comes First?

5.1. Feedback Loops and the Disappearance of “the Political” in the Systems Thinking Approach

Is it “the political” variable or “the natural” variable that comes first then? [Acemoglu and Robinson \(2012\)](#) argue for the former one, while [Diamond \(1998\)](#) for the latter one. In the previous sections, we gave several examples why both of the approaches employed in order to identify “the ultimate cause” are equally wrong. It is evident that nature plays an indispensable role regarding how societies will develop. However, it is the economic reasons and interests that will put the gifts of nature into use. Similarly, the political variable plays an equally important role, but more often than not, it only subsequently transforms into the superstructure that emerges as a result of underlying economic structures and serves to reinforce and maintain them. Perhaps unintentionally, many of the cases discussed using the two narratives emblematic for development actually contribute to the view for the primacy of the economic variable over the political institutional one, as well as the natural one.

Most importantly though, what both approaches imply (for a careful reader who is reading between the lines and not being captivated by the five manipulative techniques) is that neither the “political” nor the “natural” variables come first in the chain of events. The pathway to development is not a “chicken and egg” problem, but actually there is a feedback loop between “the natural” and “the economic” variables, and therefore, the whole development story of a nation can be anything but a linear relationship.

This gives birth to the political sphere or superstructure that eventually emerges to coordinate the interaction between the two factors. In this sense, systems thinking and the notion of human societies as parts of a broader dynamic system, which includes both the socio-economic and natural variables, is the logical step that bridges and complements both approaches. Interestingly, however, in this much more meaningful representation, the political variable is almost lost.

Indeed, in parallel to Acemoglu/Robinson’s and Diamond’s approaches, and partially because of the rising criticism on the limitations of deterministic approaches for explaining the role of either “the natural” or “the social” variables, scholars have increasingly adopted a systems thinking understanding of the two units as parts of a complex, adaptive and interactive social-ecological system (SES), a term first coined by [Gallopín \(1991\)](#). Although ([Berkes and Folke 1998](#); [Berkes et al. 2008](#)) first rejected the delineation between social systems and natural systems as arbitrary and artificial, it was due to Nobel Prize laureate, Elinor Ostrom, that the SES approach gained momentum ([Ostrom 1990, 2005](#)).

The systems thinking approach, however, in spite of accepting the roles of both “natural” and “social” variables, is also prone to criticism from many sides. Critical theorists argue that systems approaches depoliticise the situation that is being represented ([Welsh 2014](#)). For example, the SES approach might provide numerous dependent and independent variables to accurately explain how flows of capital result in deforestation, which in turn affects agricultural practices, which impact social structures of a community of subsistence cattle farmers, then impacting the natural systems by new practices leading to land erosion due to overgrazing. However, throughout this case, the nature of capital flows and globalisation processes—issues of utmost importance for development—are viewed as inevitable (rather than constant variables), and therefore, inherent conservatism is suspected ([Stojanovic et al. 2016](#)). Such de-politicization can be viewed as a part of the wider post-democratic de-politicization processes observed in the study of SES. So far, only embryonic steps have been made to reverse (re-politicise) the practises in the field ([Swyngedouw 2014](#)).

Furthermore, this SES approach is inefficient at capturing certain realms of social reality, and especially at capturing power dynamics and competing value systems integral to the system (Stojanovic et al. 2016; Cote and Nightingale 2012). Lastly, the SES approach has been criticised for importing a naturalistic concept into the social science domain, thereby failing to account for essential differences between the two systems (Armitage et al. 2012; Stojanovic et al. 2016).

In a way, it might be argued that SES scholars, in an attempt to account for “the social” variable (including political and economic dimensions), as well as for “the natural” variable, actually fail to sufficiently address either of them.

5.2. *The Need for a New Synthesis*

Despite their entry point, both approaches we explored in this paper agree that there is a sequence of events (dependent variables: A, B and C, etc.), which, in a linear way, are determined by an ultimate independent variable (X or Y as we named them). No matter what A, B or C, etc., is, they lead to Z+ (positive development outcome) or Z− (negative development outcome). However, we argue that this is not the end of the story.

As we have seen in the previous sections, for an alien or a time traveller visiting earth in 80 AD, Roman people would have Z+, and British people would have a definite Z−. Similarly, if the traveller had landed in Europe’s 18th century, Venice would have Z−, while Britain would have an excellent Z+. However, such an approach would mean that the traveller would be deriving generalised and universal conclusions on the basis of a snapshot of reality. In addition, interdependencies between the investigated variables are totally ignored. Colonialism, for instance, is a condition that simultaneously indicates Z+ for colonial powers and Z− for colonies. Nevertheless, the impact of Z−, even for a short period of history, is not further explored, neither by Acemoglu/Robinson nor by Diamond.

If we take India, for example, as our main case and not Britain, then as a British observer would see India as just experiencing a development failure Z−, for an Indian observer, the English colonial conquest might very well be the independent variables X’ and Y’ (totally irrelevant to India’s internal political institutions or natural environment) or the English colonial intervention could very well be a variable that unexpectedly appears in the series of events, thus disrupting a process that potentially could have led to a development success Z+ in India too.

Admittedly, there is no way to know what would have happened in a hypothetical situation where the European people did not conquer the American continents and the British people did not colonise India. We do know, however, what has happened: India’s economy was destroyed and America’s native societies were destroyed. In such framing, Indians and America’s native people did not choose not to adopt English institutions and technology (Acemoglu and Robinson 2012) or to not make efficient use of their natural resources to develop innovation, technology and institutions that would allow them to prosper (Diamond 1998).

In a similar line of thinking, such arguments could apply equally well to whatever community failed to sustainably manage their resources and effectively deal with the interactions between “the natural” and “the social” variables (systems thinking). Such an outcome might not be because of the failure of a society to create the institutions that would regulate the interactions between the systems and shape human behaviour (the Eastern Island paradigm), but because external intervention disrupted any political, economic, institutional or/and natural processes.

Even if we begin to unfold the story of a nation with the environmental independent variable, Y, the next variables in the causal chain will primarily be economical and not political ones, as we have seen in the cases discussed in the paper: first comes the economic structure (basis), then the political superstructure comes (Marx 2010).

However, and this is a major point here, the conceptualization of “the natural” variable as in the work by Diamond (1998), as well as in that by Ostrom and colleagues, has a number of serious flaws even if we set aside all the discussions about colonialism. This means that

a less deterministic and more differentiated approach must be established as a plethora of evidence suggests that the same or similar environmental conditions, depending on the economic decisions and activities of different social groups (societies), can re-shape the context, and then finally, result in very different socio-economic development processes and outcomes.

In this framework and building on the rich cases investigated by Diamond and by Acemoglu and Robinson, (rather narrowly and in a fallacious way as we have shown) we argue that the social variable must be augmented in a way that it accounts for diverse and competing economic interests and power relations, different environmental factors, economic structures and emerging political and social institutions. Abandoning gross oversimplifications of complex social phenomena for the sake of a compelling narrative is the only way to enable the advancement of our understanding towards tantalising questions regarding the economic development (or lack thereof) of nations, regions and whole continents.

6. Conclusions

In the search for the main explanatory variables for economic development success and failure, there have been two opposing approaches: one that attributes development entirely to "natural" factors, and another one that attributes it to "inclusive or exclusive (political) institutions". In this dichotomy an "augmented social" component accounting for a plethora of complex and interacting factors influencing the development of societies is lost. In this paper, we revisited several emblematic examples provided by [Acemoglu and Robinson \(2012\)](#) and [Diamond \(1998\)](#) to support the dichotomous positions viewed through the five manipulative techniques utilised by the authors. By deconstructing their fallacious arguments on this basis and providing a potential alternative reading, we arrived at the conclusion that this bifurcation of "thesis" and "antithesis" must be abandoned in favour of a more nuanced understanding of the complex factors that influence development.

Especially in relation to economic development, contributions from both understandings must be merged into a more dynamic concept in order to be able to account for the full complexity of the system. This process should not focus on the quest to identify "the ultimate causes" of things. Instead, it should take into account the multitude of dependent, as well as independent, variables shaping the outcome, ultimately leading to a synthesis that paves the way for much more creative, inter- and multidisciplinary research into a question that has not only bothered economists since the era of Adam Smith, but shapes the developmental policies of today.

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Notes

¹ According to the editorial reviews, the book has been recommended by six Nobel Prize winners for Economics ([Amazon 2020](#)).

- 2 These other variables (B, C and D, etc.) can be political, too, but they can also be economic or environmental variables.
- 3 Historians do not talk of a longer lasting decline of Venice until the period from 1571 to about 1700, and this for reasons that are quite different from la serrata.
- 4 Another example for “Telling only the second half of the story”: Acemoglu and Robinson (2012, p. 153) claim that it was the changes in the political and economic institutions of Venice after the assassination of the Doge in 1171 that brought about the city’s economic rise, including, in particular, the commenda/colleganza mentioned above. Indeed, the earliest surviving evidence of such a treaty in Venice dates back to 1173 after the assassination of the Doge and during the subsequent political changes (e.g., the creation of the “parliament” of the Great Council). However, the contractual or corporate form called commenda in Venice has been documented since the 8th century in Arabian trade, as well as in Mediterranean trade (Lopez et al. 2001). Therefore, it is very likely that it had been in use in Venice much earlier, for instance, through trade with Byzantium at least in the entire 11th century, and thus, it is by no means the result of the political events in Venice in 1171, as suggested.
- 5 The Ottomans conquered Egypt in 1517 and Alexandria was no longer a trading base for the Venetians. The loss of Cyprus marked another major event in the chain of losses that ended with the loss of Crete (1645–1969). The war for Crete cost Venice 125 million ducats, which corresponded to 40 (!) annual incomes for the state (Lane 1973; Stefini 2015; Pullan 1964; Faroqhi 2004; Norwich 2003).
- 6 Among the reasons were the loss of the Netherland’s maritime superiority and the loss of the Dutch New England colonies (New Amsterdam turns into New York, etc.) The process of this “Dutch decline” was, more or less, achieved due to the victory of the British in the fourth Anglo–Dutch war of 1780.
- 7 On many occasions, the billionaire and philanthropist Bill Gates has included *Guns, Germs and Steel* as one of his favourite and mostly recommended books (Gutterman 2019; Gates 2013).

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